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Through her eyes: A Gordon County woman recounts the Nazi invasion in Poland

by Sarah Jones, staff writer

06.12.11 - 02:00 pm



Terri Thomas was a young girl when Nazis destroyed her home at the beginning of World War II. Today, she resides in Gordon County. In memory of the June 6, 1944, anniversary of the Allied invasion of Normandy, France, also known as D-Day, she related her experiences during the war.

Terri Thomas was 12 years old when the Nazi army destroyed her hometown in 1939.

Born in Poland in 1927, Thomas lived in Sulejow, “kind of a major little town” on the river, with her parents and siblings.

“My home is my home,” she said, but she was forced to leave her home for her grandmother’s farm shortly after the war began.

“We were preparing for a war, and there were many stories going around about a Nazi invasion,” she said.

On Sept. 3, 1939, Sulejow was demolished by the German air force with a main focus on the bridges, which went across the river, she explained.

“Of course I was very little and petrified,” she said, recalling that her grandmother’s farmhouse was 15 kilometers away from the town where her parents and siblings remained where smoke billowed into the sky.

“I was petrified that my whole family had perished,” she said.

Almost two months later the German army began the invasion and occupation of Poland, at which time her two sisters joined her at her grandmother’s house.

“They were so petrified that they were almost paranoid,” she said of her sisters.

After several weeks at her grandmother’s house her sisters left to go back to their home and check on their parents, said Thomas. Shortly thereafter, she followed.

“I was a 12 year-old little kid, and I was going home,” she said.

She arrived to a house completely demolished by war.

“It was the most horrifying site to see the town just demolished,” she said. According to Thomas she saw human remains amongst the rubble of her once quiet and beautiful hometown.

“The smell was horrible,” she said, and a bomb had fallen beside her house demolishing her favorite childhood tree and leaving behind nothing but a gaping hole.

For six months after she returned home she endured dawn to dusk curfews, struggled for food and feared the Nazi soldiers who constantly patrolled the city streets.

“They always walked in six men. Never one, two, or three, they were always a steady six of them,” she recalled. “They must have had iron under their shoes because they were so loud on the sidewalks.”

Her family moved into two rooms in their house and other families who had lost their homes moved in with them.

“We (the Polish) were of course, nothing, we had no rights or anything,” she said.

A day that changed them all

According to Thomas, her life changed the day in the winter of 1943 when the “Gestapo” came looking for her father, who had been a member of the Polish military during the First World War. Shortly after the start of the second war and the invasion of Poland, her father had become a leader in the Resistance Forces, a union of rebels despised by the Nazis.

The Nazis first visited Thomas’ home to inquire about the whereabouts of her father, she said, but a neighbor ran to where Thomas’ older sister worked to tell her to warn her father that the Gestapo were looking for him.

“He managed to escape, and that was the last time I saw my dad for 23 years,” said Thomas.

Her father spent the remainder of the war and sometime after in the Resistance Forest in Poland, but the other members of her family became political targets for the Nazis, Thomas said.

Three weeks later her older sister was sent to Auschwitz, the German concentration camp responsible for 1.1 million deaths during the war, where she was held captive for two years.

Several weeks later, Thomas and her other sister were arrested by the Germans and interrogated. She was 14-years old.

“We pretended we didn’t know anything,” she said, and because of that she and her sister were put into forced labor camps where they worked for the remainder of the war.

Her mother was taken to an experimental concentration camp in Berlin, Thomas said, where the Nazis tested anti-frost treatments on her legs. She almost died in that camp, said Thomas, but was rescued by the Red Cross and taken to Sweden at the end of the war.

A victory for us all

On the morning of April 3, 1943, Thomas was taken out to work in the fields, as they were every day. On this particular day, the soldier in charge came to the fields without his Luger, she recalled. As they all stood in a group curious about what was going on, there was a low rumble, which slowly grew louder, she said. It was an American tank. After years of forced labor, her liberation day had arrived.

“You can’t believe the feeling (on Liberation day),” she said

As her excitement grew at the thought of the war coming to an end, she “ran right in front of the tank,” she said, and a soldier had to throw her out of the way.

“I would have died the day I was liberated,” she said with a laugh.

“All of a sudden, after six years, all this oppression I lived under, I was free.”

According to Thomas, she was liberated by the same army as her sister later was, and they were finally reunited.

“You all of a sudden looked at people who had been your superiour, and I could just say ‘No.’ I had the right to say ‘No.’”

To this day Thomas still hails General George Patton, a general who was instrumental in the surrender of Germans, as her hero, she said.

“When I think about the U.S. soldiers-45,000 died the first day of Normandy just to get us liberated,” she said through tears. “I’m grateful I’m here. I love this country.”

A horrifying site

Thomas recounted a day shortly after the invasion of her hometown in Poland when the cruel reality of the war became all too real.

According to Thomas, she was walking to a shop where a woman had freshly baked bread when she passed the town hall, now occupied by the Germans. As she passed the building she looked back to see several Nazi soldiers come out dragging a young priest from the town.

As Thomas looked on as a terrified 12 year-old, she watched as the soldiers pushed the priest down the stairs in front of the building. The priest struggled to get up, said Thomas, but as the young man tried to regain his footing, the soldiers

shot him.

“I saw my priest killed that night,” she said. “What could we do? Nothing. This is what we lived under-constant fear.”

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