

## **Kaia, Heroine of the 1944 Warsaw Rising**

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**Author:**

Aleksandra Ziolkowska-Boehm

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Christoph Mick

This is a very personal book, first published in Polish in 2006. The author, Aleksandra Ziolkowska-Boehm, tells the story of Cezaria Ilyin Szymańska, a personal friend who participated in the Warsaw Rising of 1944. Kaia is the name under which the heroine is known to her friends. The idea of writing about Kaia's life can be traced back to conversations and an exchange of letters between the author and her heroine.

The author has combined quotes from letters with passages in which she retells what she heard from Kaia herself. The author uses a collage technique (following the example of Ryszard Kapuściński) and a 'mosaic method' developed by her teacher, the Polish writer Melchior Wałkowiak. Ziolkowska-Boehm also makes use of quotes from other testimonies and from historical literature. The book has 37 chapters, many of them only a few pages long. The chapters consist of thematically arranged stories and reminiscences or summaries of Kaia's impressions of places she lived at or visited during different periods of her life. A considerable part of the book does not deal with the Warsaw Uprising but with Kaia's life, family and friends before and after the war. These chapters contain numerous comments by the author and sometimes include extensive quotes from books on Polish history.

Kaia's story – as unusual as it appears to be at first glance – is a typically Polish story. She was born on 2 April 1916 in the small town of Zaysan (today in Kazakhstan) in the western part of Dzungaria not far from the Altai Mountains. She and her family were not the only Poles in the region. In the 19th century the Russian government deported many Poles to Siberia or Central Asia as a punishment for socialist or patriotic activities. After the turn of the century a growing number of Poles also had economic motives for emigrating to the north and east of the Russian Empire. One of these economic emigrants was Kaia's maternal

grandfather Bolesław Szemiot, who found employment in Djungaria as an engineer building roads and bridges. Kaia's father, Modest Iljin, was a student at St. Petersburg University who was sent to Siberia because of his underground activities. Kaia's parents married in 1908 and Cezaria was born as their second child.

After the October Revolution the family continued to live in Djungaria and lived out the years of the First World War and the Russian civil war there. Ziolkowska-Boehm recounts a few anecdotes from Kaia's early childhood during these troublesome times. By 1922 life under Bolshevik rule had become unbearable and the family decided to leave for Poland. This was easier said than done and it proved to be a very long journey. The family travelled by train and it took almost a year before they arrived in Białyystok where they settled. The following chapters tell of Kaia's experiences at school and include reminiscences of Kazakhstan and her youth together with a short chapter on animals and their importance in Kaia's life and that of her family. How these stories are remembered many decades later gives an interesting insight into the processes of remembering and forgetting. Childhood memories are often very vivid while memories of later events often fade away quickly. This can also be seen here. The reader learns much more about Kaia's early years than about her life as a young adult.

The main part of the book deals with the Second World War and the German occupation of Poland. Ziolkowska-Boehm does not offer any deep analysis of the reasons and consequences of the Warsaw Uprising. The author quotes some of the research literature but there is a greater focus on quotes taken from the testimonies of participants of the Uprising and linking these comments to Kaia's own recollections. Kaia's resistance initially consisted of attending courses held by the underground university. Later she participated in the Uprising and worked as a messenger, a very dangerous role as it entailed helping the different groups of insurgents to keep in contact with each other. Always at risk of being shot by German soldiers or caught in crossfire she risked her life more than once, and all the stories show her to be a very brave woman. These chapters do not exclusively focus on Kaia. They also attest to the heroism of her fellow insurgents, also containing a portrait of Kaia's later husband Marek Szymański and descriptions of friends and acquaintances, interspersed with anecdotes demonstrating the commitment of the insurgents. Marek Szymański had been a captain in the unit of Major Henryk Dobrzański (code name: Hubal) who commanded the last regular unit of the Polish Army still fighting Nazi Germany in the autumn of 1939. Hubal also formed the first underground unit which resumed the fight against the occupiers. Ziolkowska-Boehm praises the heroism of this unit and of its leader Major Hubal who died fighting against the German occupiers on 30 April 1940. Marek Szymański took over the command of the Hubal partisans until the unit was dissolved in June. Szymański was later highly decorated for his role in the Polish Army and in the resistance against Nazi Germany. One leitmotif of the book is the story of the Virtuti Militari order previously awarded to Major Dobrzański. It was Kaia's task to guard the order and she managed to keep it safe during the Uprising and during her time as a Soviet prisoner.

After the defeat of the Uprising Kaia fled Warsaw but she was soon arrested by agents of the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (abridged in Russian as NKVD). She was brought to NKVD Camp 41 in Ostashkov where she remained imprisoned until 1946.

The last part of the book covers life in Communist Poland. After she was released Kaia returned to Warsaw where she worked as an architect on the reconstruction of the city. She wanted to lead a normal life, and the book tells about her travels and her work, but also shows how badly former non-Communist resistance fighters were treated. Their resistance against Nazi Germany was marginalised, although it survived in the memory of those who had lived through those difficult times. Kaia's husband Marek remained loyal to Major Hubal even in Communist Poland. He saw it as his task to preserve Hubal's memory.

The book includes a number of black-and-white photographs, many of them from Kaia's personal collection. There are two appendices at the end of the book. Appendix one consists of short quotes about Siberia by people who were there but also by Americans who were asked what they knew about Siberia. It is not clear how these quotes or the subsequent quotes about the Warsaw Uprising were collected. The quotes from Americans without Polish roots indicate the lack of historical knowledge about Poland's fate during the

## Second World War.

The book tries to preserve as much of Kaia's life as possible for posterity and is also a celebration of Polish heroism and a testimony to Polish suffering. The decision to start the Uprising is not criticised but is presented as the result of a decision taken by the resistance fighters themselves. Like Kaia, the author does not question whether the Uprising made political or military sense but views the Uprising as a natural event, not unlike a volcanic eruption. She is right to point out that *a posteriori* criticism often does not take contemporary circumstances and the explosive mood in Warsaw sufficiently into account. There are some good arguments in support of the opinion that the Uprising would have happened anyway, with or without the approval of the local command of the Home Army and without the consent of the government-in-exile. This, however, misses the point. One of the main problems of the Uprising was its timing – it came too early. The German forces were still too strong. Starting the Uprising in August 1944 was also a political decision. The command of the Home Army and the government-in-exile wanted to liberate Warsaw before the arrival of Soviet troops as they hoped to improve the Polish position in the negotiations with Britain, France, the USA and the Soviet Union. However, the aim of the book is not to participate in these historiographical debates. Ziolkowska-Boehm has created a moving testimony to her friend, whose biography is woven into the history of Poland in the 20th century. The Polish original won the literature prize of the Association of Polish Writers Abroad (London) in 2007.

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