

Per Aspera ad Astra:

Recollections and Reflections of Karl Heinz Borowsky

Part I: Per Aspera: Childhood Through War

Have you ever considered that, without the help of those closest to us—our parents, older siblings, relatives, and friends—we would have little or no memory of our earliest days and years in this world? The first chapter of our life is, in many ways, written by others before we are able to write it ourselves.

I was born on June 20, 1939—only ten weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War—at the *Frauenklinik* in Gleiwitz, Oberschlesien, Germany. I grew up in the small village of Ligota Łabędzka in Oberschleisen (*Górny Śląsk*). During my childhood and adolescence, I also spent considerable time in Katowitz—the regional capital—with my grandparents.

I was baptized “Karl Heinz Borowsky.” In 1945, however, when Silesia came under Polish administration, my first and last names were changed bureaucratically to “Karol Henryk Borowski.” Yet despite this official alteration, I remained the same person. After all, as Shakespeare wrote, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

My dear parents, Antonius and Adelheid (née Krakowsky), often shared with me and my four sisters vivid and inspiring stories from our early childhood. We frequently looked through the treasured family album together. Those photographs kept our memories—and our imagination—alive.

In 1979, my mother sent me a letter that included a page from her diary describing her great joy at the birth of a son. She added recollections from my earliest years and enclosed several photographs. Reading her words decades later gave depth and tenderness to memories that were otherwise fragmentary.

1. My First Personal Recollections

My earliest personal memory reaches back to the summer of 1942. It was June 10—my mother’s birthday. Before breakfast, I went to a nearby meadow to pick flowers for her. On my way home, however, the sight of horses and cows grazing in a fenced pasture captured my attention. Fascinated, I sat down by the fence and watched them for what must have been a long time.

Meanwhile, my mother and sisters became increasingly worried and began searching for me. When they finally found me, they scolded me gently and escorted me home.

A few days later, I saw a farmer working with two horses near our house. I approached him and learned that his name was Dimitri. He was a friendly young man who lifted me up and placed me on his black horse, Lotte. I was thrilled and loved every moment.

Over time, Dimitri and I became friends. He was a sixteen-year-old forced laborer from Ukraine, assigned to work on our neighbor’s farm. We met often. I would bring him cookies or candies from home to share. In return, he taught me a few Ukrainian words. I repeated them proudly in public—much to the surprise, and sometimes irritation, of some neighbors.

To me, Dimitri became a self-appointed older brother during those years.

In January 1945, when the Red Army entered Silesia, Dimitri protected our family from aggressive Soviet and Polish soldiers. Soon afterward, however, he left with the troops and joined the Red Army.

4. My First “Farm”

My parents, out of necessity due to wartime food shortages—and also from genuine love of gardening—maintained a well-developed vegetable garden and fruit orchard.

They assigned to me a small section where I tended flowers, radishes, and tomatoes. This modest plot became my “first farm.” It taught me patience, responsibility, and reverence for the rhythms of nature.

Working the soil, planting seeds, watching growth—these were early lessons in stewardship and quiet discipline.

Throughout my life, gardening has remained a deeply satisfying and productive hobby. The seeds planted in childhood never disappeared.

15. Reflection: War, Conscience, and Identity

Looking back at those early years, I realize that my childhood was shaped less by toys or games and more by events that forced rapid moral awareness.

I witnessed courage and brutality, kindness and cruelty—often within the same uniform.

A Ukrainian forced laborer became our protector.

A German officer uncle showed gentleness to a child.

A Soviet soldier burned our accordion.

Another Soviet soldier placed bread beside a newborn baby.

War does not divide humanity into simple categories of good and evil. It reveals both within each person.

I learned that conscience can survive even under tyranny. I saw it in my grandfather and my father when they quietly hoped that the failed assassination of Hitler might succeed the next time. I saw it again when my father chose not to sacrifice sixteen-year-old boys to hopeless destruction and instead told them, “Rette sich, wer kann.”

I learned that material possessions are fragile. A wedding ring can be torn away. A musical instrument can be burned. A home can be stripped of its language and its signs. Yet faith, dignity, and moral conviction can remain intact.

The erasure of language and culture in postwar Silesia taught me another lesson: identity imposed from outside is never complete. My name was changed, but my sense of self was not erased.

In those formative years, I came to understand that history is not an abstract force. It enters kitchens, bedrooms, schools, and churches. It tests families. It demands courage, desideration, and support, and much factual knowledge.

The question is not whether one lives in turbulent times. The question is how one responds to them.

Those early experiences formed the foundation of my later choices—in education, in family life, in academic work, and in efforts to build bridges between nations.

Through difficulties to the stars—*per aspera ad astra*—is not merely a motto. It is a lived reality.