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Last Updated: Sunday, 1 August, 2004, 02:09 GMT 03:09 UK

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Boy messenger remembers uprising

by **Martha Buckley**
BBC News Online

Among the thousands of ordinary men, women and children who joined the Warsaw Uprising in August 1944 was 12-year-old Krzysztof Rowinski, who volunteered as a messenger for the Home Army.

Days before the Warsaw Uprising, as it was to become known, everyone in the city knew something was afoot.

Hospitals had started stocking up on supplies and by 1 August the tension was reaching fever pitch.

Krzysztof, now 72 and living in Barnet, north London, told BBC News Online: "I saw a great excitement on the streets and a lot of young men rushing out to various places. Later, I found out these were the starting places for the attack on the Germans.

"They carried packages which sometimes looked a lot like guns but the German patrols didn't try to stop them."



Krzysztof as a young man, shortly after the end of war

Front Line

Suddenly, at 5pm, Home Army soldiers staged a simultaneous attack on German-held positions throughout the city. The uprising had begun.

Krzysztof found himself with his mother at his grandfather's house near the railway station. The building was crowded with young men.

At the moment the shooting began, he heard all the trams in the neighbourhood come screeching to a halt.

A German soldier ran down the street, looking up at a hotel window, only to be gunned down by someone inside.

Krzysztof watched as a man on a loaded rickshaw dodged a line of bullets as he pedalled up the street to the house.

The man was admitted to the inner courtyard, where, to Krzysztof's amazement, he ripped off the covers to reveal a load of guns, machine pistols and grenades.



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He said: "Next a man ran through the basements and emerged in the house, machine gun in hand and said: 'Are there any Germans here?' and everybody started singing the Polish national anthem.

"All the young men pulled out red and white armbands and put them on. They were becoming an army in front of me. It was a very moving moment, very exciting."

Overnight, Krzysztof's street became the front line, with Germans guns firing at his

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house and tank shells raining onto the street.

Wildcat

To escape the battle, the family moved to stay with friends in another part of Warsaw. As they fled they saw the streets were covered with glass from the fighting.

They arrived in the quieter district of Powisle, but life was not peaceful for long. Despite his mother's qualms, Krzysztof volunteered to be a messenger for the Home Army and was taken to a local headquarters.

There he found another boy messenger, about his age, who told him what he was expected to do.

He said: "I was middle class and a little bit spoilt but he was a real street urchin and as we were so different, we got on very well and we spent the night chatting.

“ It was no longer cowboys and Indians - it was the real thing

”

Krzysztof Rowinski

"The next day I heard he had been killed on one of the barricades while he was delivering a message and a mortar shell exploded.

"It was the first big shock for me. It meant it was no longer cowboys and Indians - it was the real thing."

Over the next month, Krzysztof got used to dangerous missions and terrible sights as he roamed Warsaw as a messenger, using his code name Zbik, or Wildcat, and wearing a captured German army cap and oversized uniform.

Blood

He said: "I had some near misses. Once I was on a steep street heading down to the river where there was a gun boat shelling the street.

"I had to go all the way down the street into this fire. So I would hide in doorways and wait and then there would be an explosion and I would go on to the next doorway.

"As I was going down I could see a man coming up the street doing the same thing.

"When I was about halfway, a shell exploded and I was knocked unconscious but I was not injured. When I got up I could see blood coming into the street and I thought the man had lost his head.

"I looked - it was very terrifying - and I saw he had in fact lost both his legs and that was the blood was coming from. His face was completely stunned from the pain.

"People came to help and I carried on with my order and delivered my message. Then I went back to my quarter and cried my eyes out."

By September, it was clear the Home Army could no longer defend Powisle district. He was relieved of his duties and his family was advised to flee.

The district was soon under heavy bombardment, with the asphalt on the roads melting from the heat of blazing buildings.

The family left as the battle raged, crawling under barricades as they went.

He said: "The Germans were shooting at the barricades but because they were made of sand and so on, they would hold the bullets. Everyone was shaking. I saw one woman who was shot in the head because she put her head up too high."

Once, they sheltered in an embassy district on the front line, where the bombardment



Medals were given to the Home Army after the war

was lighter, as the Germans feared hitting their own positions.

He said: "At one point there was a lull in the fighting and one of the Home Army soldiers sat at a piano and played some Chopin and when he finished, we heard applause from the German positions. The Germans were always very fond of music."

Getting enough food was a major struggle.

Krzysztof said: "Everyone in Warsaw was starving. Someone would offer you a rabbit and you knew it was a cat. All the animals and birds and pigeons disappeared from the city."



Krzysztof eventually settled down to live in the UK

It was while out looking for food for his family that he again came close to death.

He said: "I went to a building in Hoza Street to meet an engineer to trade - I think I had some sugar.

"I was talking to him on the fourth or fifth floor and I suddenly had the feeling I had to leave. So in the middle of a sentence I stepped back and ran to the ground floor as fast as I could. I can remember the astonishment on his face.

"I ran along the street and I stopped in a hole by a staircase. There were heavy explosions as bombs fell.

"When the dust had settled I went back to look and the building I had been in was destroyed. It had been hit and I suppose everyone in there was killed."

“ I carried on with my order and delivered my message. Then I went back to my quarter and cried my eyes out ”

Krzysztof Rowinski

Iron Curtain

By now the end was near. The Home Army negotiated an honourable capitulation with the Germans, who evacuated the population and systematically destroyed Warsaw before losing it to the Russians.

Krzysztof and his mother stayed in Poland until 1947, when they escaped over the German border and eventually made it to England, where his father had settled after fighting with the Allies.

His older brother Marek was captured as he tried a different route over the border and was sent back to Poland, where he remained stranded on the other side of the Iron Curtain throughout the Cold War.

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