

Lusia Przybyszewicz

Title: *All That Was*

Author: Lusia Przybyszewicz

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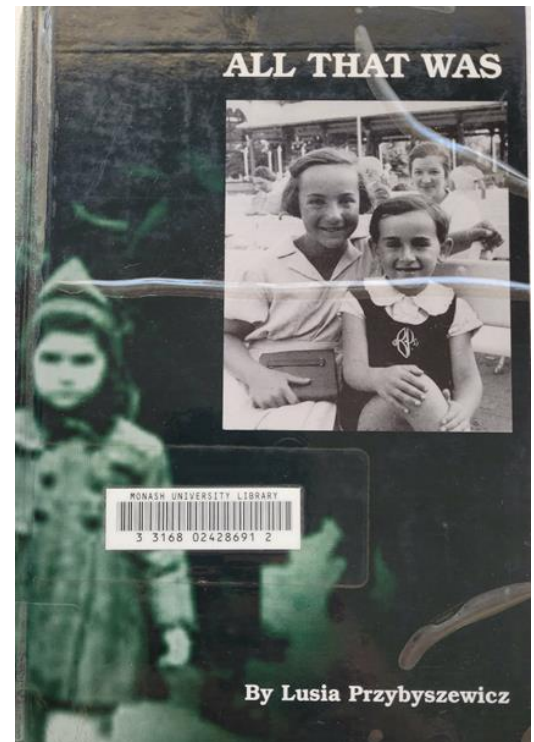
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Cities/towns/camps: Poland: Łódź, Warsaw; Germany: Wolfsburg, Kdf-Stadt; France: Paris, Nogent-sur-Seine; Australia: Sydney.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Warsaw ghetto; false identity; in-hiding; Polish voluntary labourer.



All That Was is the 446-page memoir of Polish-born survivor Lusia Przybyszewicz who survived the Warsaw ghetto before escaping and going into-hiding as a Polish labourer in Germany.

Pages 1-110 describe the author's childhood in Łódź, family life and school years. Pages 111-28 recount the onset of the war, Nazi occupation and antisemitic restrictions in Łódź. Pages 129-84 describe the family's relocation to Warsaw in November 1939 and internment in the ghetto from 1940-42. Pages 185-218 cover Lusia's escape from the ghetto and time in hiding under a false Aryan identity in Warsaw. Pages 219-350 discuss her experiences as a Polish labourer in the Kdf-Stadt region of Germany until liberation by the American army in April 1945. Pages 351-446 recount Lusia's time in France until her emigration to Australia in 1947.

Melania (Lusia) Przybyszewicz was born in Łódź on 26 March 1923 to Dwojra Fragman and Chaskiel (Henryk) Przybyszewicz. She had a younger brother Bolek. The family was middle-class and assimilated; her father was managing director of a large and successful textile enterprise. Though not strictly observant, they kept shabbat and attended a Reform synagogue. Lusia was educated at a private school with mostly Jewish students.

After the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939, Łódź was occupied. Antisemitic abuse escalated rapidly – Chasidic Jews were beaten in the streets, synagogues were burned, Jewish businesses seized, and curfews imposed. Chaskiel was replaced as managing director by an ethnic German, Adolf Brauner, a friend and former colleague. Brauner, whose wife and son were Jewish, was sympathetic to the plight of the

Przybyszewicz family and became instrumental to their survival. Through Brauner's intervention, Chaskiel was able to continue working at the factory despite his demotion. Brauner also personally escorted Chaskiel to work to shield him from abuse.

In November 1939, Brauner secured travel passes for the Przybyszewicz children and arranged for them to be smuggled to Warsaw to live with their maternal Aunt Natka and Uncle Adolf. In December, he helped smuggle the parents to Warsaw.

In mid-1940, as the Warsaw ghetto was being established, the extended Przybyszewicz family was forcibly relocated within the ghetto boundaries. On 15 November 1940, the ghetto was sealed.

In the ghetto, Lusja continued her schooling, attending clandestine classes as well as helping to teach the younger children. Over time conditions worsened and food rations tightened. By 1941, starvation was widespread and the streets filled with beggars. Lice infestation produced a deadly typhus epidemic. Corpses lay in the streets, to be collected by carts and dumped in mass graves at the cemetery. One-by-one, Lusja's large extended family perished from illness and starvation.

Smuggling became essential for survival. Desperate, Lusja then aged 18 and her friend Jasja – both able to pass as Aryans – began smuggling typhus vaccines into the ghetto, with the help of Jasja's Christian cousins on the Aryan side. By mid-1942, it became essential to secure work to avoid deportation, very difficult to obtain as economic activity was minimal. Through contacts of her mother, in July 1942 Lusja secured a position at the Többens factory repairing German uniforms. Days later, notices of "resettlement" appeared.

When mass deportations commenced Lusja watched helplessly as women, children and the elderly were viciously beaten and shot in the streets enroute to the *Umschlagplatz*. While deportations raged, Lusja was marched to work under armed escort to labour 12-hour days in a dim, overcrowded workshop.

Through her black-market contacts, Lusja began preparing for escape. In August 1942, she finally acquired forged identity papers and fled the ghetto after bribing the guards. On the Aryan side she went into hiding with her Catholic rescuers, posing as their niece from the countryside. She helped in the household and accompanied the family to Sunday Mass, learning Catholic prayers that would prove crucial to her survival. She maintained intermittent contact with her relatives and tragically learnt that her mother was murdered during an *Aktion* in September.

Later that month, Lusja secured work in a factory making torches for the German army. After a botched attempt to help her brother Bolek escape the ghetto, Lusja's hiding place was exposed and she was forced onto the streets, spending many months as a vagabond, living hand-to-mouth. During the Warsaw ghetto uprising her father and brother were deported to Majdanek where they were murdered. Exhausted, Lusja presented to authorities as a voluntary Polish labourer and was sent to Wolfsburg, Germany.

For two years, Lusia worked as a cleaner and kitchen hand at a hotel near the Volkswagen factory in wartime *KdF-Stadt*. Although treated as a lowly servant and belittled as a “racially inferior” Polish woman, her conditions improved. She was soon joined by two other Jewish girls disguised as Polish labourers.

In February 1945, as the Allied armies approached, her boss fired the girls and they were sent to a camp for Polish labourers. For the final weeks of the war, Lusia laboured at the Volkswagen factory kitchen until liberated by American forces in April.

In May, Lusia travelled to Paris with her French boyfriend Marcel on an American repatriation train. She was issued a political refugee identity card and was supported by the various Jewish and Catholic relief agencies. Lusia secured a position as a teacher in Nogent-sur-Seine at a Polish-language school.

After acquiring landing permits, obtained by her paternal uncle Joseph, Lusia emigrated to Australia on the Dutch ship *Johann de Witt* along with 750 other refugees, many of whom were Holocaust survivors, arriving in Sydney in April 1947. After many years of silence, Lusia began writing her memoir in the 1990s.

All That Was is a richly detailed and comprehensive memoir of the author’s childhood and wartime experiences, interwoven with reflections on later life and return journeys to Europe. The narrative evokes the vibrant Jewish cultural life of pre-war Łódź and offers a vivid, unflinching portrayal of conditions in the Warsaw ghetto. It candidly explores the material and psychological horrors of ghetto life, offering a vivid portrayal of daily struggle to survive, the actions of the Judenrat, and moral breakdown, including sexual exploitation. The author’s recollections are detailed, yet occasionally non-linear; as she writes, “the sheer horror of that period was so intense and unrelenting that I do not quite recall the order of events.” The memoir also provides a rare and compelling account of Jewish women living in hiding as Polish labourers in Germany, offering valuable insight into the experiences of foreign workers in wartime KdF-Stadt.