STEFAN TYMIEC JUNIOR

A childhood home in Steinort and the long road to the West

by Ulla Lauchauer, Agata Kern

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Photo credit: Dr. Stefan Tymiec. Since he was nine years old, he has played the accordion.
Ulla Lachauer, Free access - no reuse

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Stefan Tymiec was born in Sztynort in July 1950. “I had a happy childhood”, he says. He hardly felt anything of the tragedies that his parents had lived through. His mother was German and remained in her homeland in 1945. His father was Ukrainian, one of many people who had been forcibly resettled from southeastern Poland. Stefan's childhood happiness lasted eight years, then the family set off for the West.

Stefan Tymiec is seventy today, but still professionally active. The conversation takes place at his medical practice in Wuppertal.[1] At one point, his father, Stefan Tymiec Senior, who is a hundred years old, sits down with us. "The midwife came running in from the field, and I was already half out," the son tells us. His father continues: "She still had dirty hands and put the child in my arms". They laugh in unison – obviously the two have a very close relationship.

Stefan was the firstborn son. Later came two brothers and a sister. In the photo from the summer of 1951, he is dressed up like a little prince. "The knitted knee-length socks are made from old sacks from UNRRA”, the United Nations Emergency Relief and Reconstruction Administration.

Stefan's mother Aurelia originally came from Warmia. Born a Milkus, she grew up Roman Catholic, German on her mother's side, her late father was a Prussian Lithuanian. At the end of the war, her mother Gertrud had decided to stay in the homeland, where she knew her way around and there was plenty to eat.

Aurelia Milkus (17) and Stefan Tymiec (29) on their wedding day in September 1949. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

Stefan in August 1951, having just learnt to walk. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

Mother and daughter moved to Sztynort. It was there that Aurelia, then sixteen years old, met Stefan Tymiec. She was a milker on the collective farm. He was a tractor driver, twelve years older, a farmer's son from Horyniec, in the Carpathian foothills. He, too, came from an ethnically mixed region – his father was Ukrainian and his mother Polish. In 1947, in the course of "Operation Vistula",

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"Operation Vistula" (Polish: Akcja Wisła) refers to the forced resettlement of about 150,000 ethnic Ukrainians, Lemkos and Boykos from the Polish eastern territories to the so-called "Recovered Territories" in the west of the country, mostly in the period from April to July 1947.

the family was transported in a cattle wagon to Masuria, one of the so-called "recovered territories".

"recovered territories".

The former German eastern territories, including Gdansk, which had become part of the People's Republic after World War II, were referred to in Poland from 1945 as the "Recovered Territories" (Ziemie Odzyskane in Polish).

Stefan Tymiec wanted Aurelia Milkus immediately, but she resisted at first. The wedding was in September 1949.

They were an unequal couple in terms of their age, denomination (he was Greek Catholic), and language – so many differences had to be bridged. In everyday life, the couple spoke German with each other. During the war, Stefan Tymiec had worked for a year and a half in the potash mines on the Werra, "voluntarily," as he always emphasized. He was attracted by the adventure. He was someone who could find his way around anywhere and learned quickly. In the wedding photo, he looks a bit like Charlie Chaplin – with a dark beard and a rather oversized suit.

Until the age of seven, Stefan junior spoke only German, the language of his mother and the grandmother who lived with them. At that time, he did not know that his village had, until recently, belonged to Germany. "Lehndorff? Never heard of it! The castle was just a normal building for me. My parents' superiors lived there, there was the dining room for the workers and a store."

Aurelia and Stefan Tymiec with their three sons; in the middle stands grandma Gertrud Milkus, 1954/55. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

Only the harvest festival can he remember more clearly. Wearing their Sunday best, the family would make their way to the Schlossberg, where sandwiches were served on large trays. "It was a happy experience. We only knew home-baked bread."

"Everything in my childhood was beautiful and colorful," says the 70-year-old. “The meadows, the forest and the lakes. The flowers along the fences that I picked for my mother's birthday."

Stefan was five years old when his mother developed breast cancer. He remembers when she came home from the hospital. "She showed me her bandage and said, ‘Mommy’s sore.' And apparently I said, 'When I grow up, I'm going to be a doctor and heal you.'" Turning sad things into good would become a life-long theme for Stefan Tymiec.

On the first day of school, he didn't know a word of Polish. About a quarter of the class felt the same way. Fortunately, his teacher was bilingual, "He always interpreted for us".

His class in Sztynort. Stefan is the blonde boy in the second row up, second from left. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

At school he was "the German" and had to defend himself against the Polish boys. And getting good grades was, in the opinion of his parents, the best protection.

He often heard the adults talking about leaving for West Germany, to relatives in Remscheid-Lennep or Düren. Only later did he understand that the family was "sitting on packed suitcases". One application after another had been rejected. Each time, the Polish authorities argued that Gertrud Milkus had signed a document in 1946 stating that she wanted to stay and was therefore a Polish citizen.

In Sztynort, life was poor – there was future there. So, in 1958, the family, like many others who wanted to emigrate,

The three brothers at their first communion, 1960. From left: Marian, Sebastian, Stefan. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

moved to Słubice, the border town in western Poland.[2] It was a first step towards the destination they dreamt of: from the banks of the Oder River, they could see the East German city of Frankfurt.

Stefan's father worked as a sewing machine fitter in a factory. His mother Aurelia, who had given birth to a girl after three sons, worked as a seamstress. The most important thing for them was the children's education: "Learn so that you can have a better life! Learn, otherwise you will always be outsiders!"

Although money was tight, the children were sent to music school. "My mother sang a lot. Her favorite instrument was the accordion, so she enrolled us kids in accordion lessons."

The children helped out on the family's small farm. They had a cow and a pig, and chickens, raised vegetables and fruit for their own use. They also had several dozen bee colonies: since his youth in Horyniec, father Stefan had kept bees. The honey, up to 1,000 kilos per year, brought in a good extra income.

The four Tymiec children in 1963, standing on a linden tree stump. Their father carpentered beehives from the wood. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

"Poverty unites us. Wealth pushes us apart." Says Stefan Tymiec Junior. The Catholic faith and the strict rejection of communism also kept the family together.

In 1968, the family moved to Eisenhüttenstadt – another step westward. Stefan had already graduated from high school in Słubice. He dreamed of studying medicine at the famous Humboldt University in East Berlin. His German left much to be desired, and he had been stateless since his resettlement. Somehow, he managed to overcome all the hurdles. "I was a brave guy at the time."

At the Charité, he met Anemone, a medical student from Saxony. These were hopeful years of love, friendships, big city life, but his inner restlessness remained. Stefan Tymiec began to take an interest in Steinort and its history. For the first time he read something about Heinrich von Lehndorff ↗ and the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944.

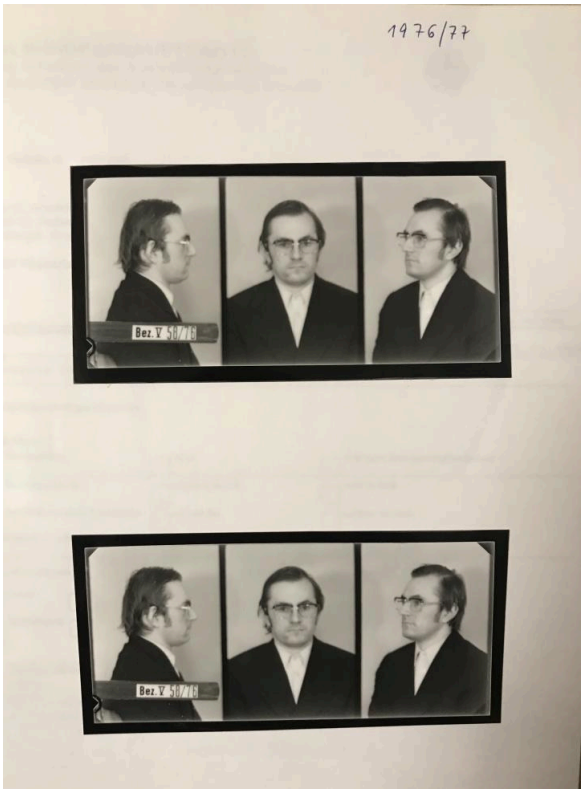
Stefan and Anemone Tymiec's wedding. They married in 1974 in the Eisenhüttenstadt town hall. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

Shortly before receiving his license to practice medicine in May 1974, Stefan Tymiec married his girlfriend Anemone "under the supervisory gaze of Erich Honecker". Now it was time! While the young doctor was gaining experience at the hospital in Köpenick, the couple made plans to escape. All the Tymiecs wanted was to "go to the West". In October 1976, they finally dared to do it. Their plan was to travel across the ČSSR in two groups, cross the border into Austria

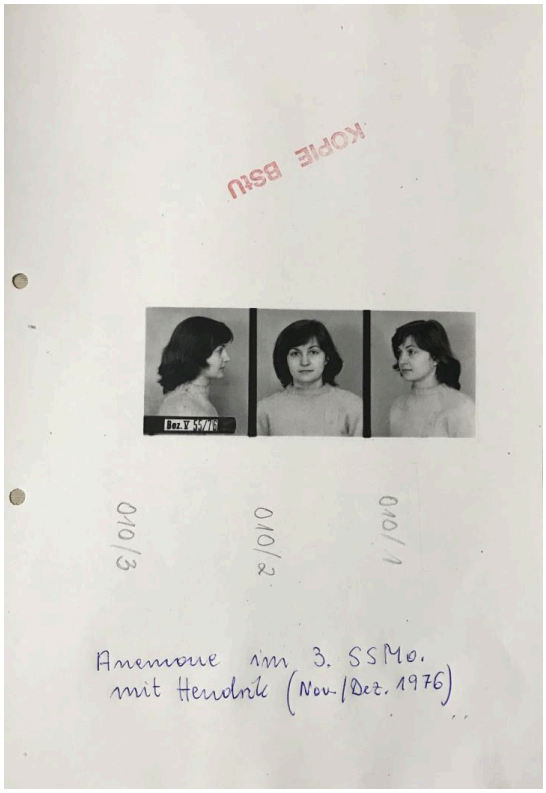
and meet up in Vienna.

But the group, consisting of Anemone, who was two months pregnant, Stefan, his younger brother Marian and his girlfriend, failed to pull it off. In the ČSSR they were discovered hiding in a truck and arrested. What a nightmare! They faced three years and ten months in prison, the women a little less. Anemone was temporarily released to give birth. Hendrik was born in June 1977, and in December his mother had to send him to a children's home.

In March 1978, the Federal Republic of Germany paid for the four to be released early. It was not until St. Nicholas Day that Stefan and Anemone Tymiec were finally able to hold their son in their arms. "That's when I saw Hendrik for the first time." He still gets teary-eyed when he thinks of it today. "I hated everything red. For years, I couldn't even wear a red sweater."



Photos of Stefan Tymiec from his Stasi file. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse



Photos of Anemone Tymiec from her Stasi file. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

Finally, they'd arrived! Freedom! They stayed with family in Remscheid. Then their second son, Patrick, was born. They rolled up their sleeves and knew they could do this!

In 1980, Stefan and Anemone Tymiec opened their own practice in Wuppertal. At first, patients were reluctant to come, "because our name sounded foreign. But when martial law was imposed in Poland in 1981, large numbers of ethnic German immigrants and dissidents

began arriving in the FRG, including the Bergisches Land region, and a Polish-speaking doctor was now in demand.

This was a perfect challenge for the couple and their business flourished. In just one decade, Stefan and Anemone Tymiec had managed to achieve their ambitious goals. Their sons Hendrik and Patrick later followed in their footsteps, also becoming doctors. The long road to the West had been worth it.

And history proved them right: On November 9, 1989, they sat stunned in front of the television. "We couldn't believe it – all that without a single shot fired, without any deaths." The Wall had fallen. One communist regime after another collapsed.

Stefan and Anemone Tymiec with their staff at their medical practice in 1987. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

The family had not yet fully put down their roots in the land of their dreams. But now Stefan Tymiec turned his gaze back again, to the east. What was happening in Poland? Where were all his old friends? In Słubice, in Sztynort? In the summer of 1990, Stefan Tymiec traveled to Masuria again and fell in love once again with the landscape of his childhood. He took in the grandeur and beauty of Lehndorff Palace. It stood empty, the village at its feet was as poor as ever.

What Stefan Tymiec saw called forth his entrepreneurial spirit. He noticed that medicines were in short supply here, so the next time he came, he brought some with him. For two or three years, he supplied pharmacies with aspirin and vitamins, until the big retailers displaced him.

Stefan Tymiec's S-class Mercedes in front of Lehndorff Palace, 1995. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

Why not invest in Steinort Castle? The main building was "a bottomless pit", too big and run-down to be worth sinking money into. But the old granary seemed solid, suitable perhaps for a hotel and restaurant. Tymiec was one of the first to make plans for a revival of the historic site.

Together with an architect, he examined the building down to the smallest detail, calculated everything meticulously – but then decided stepped away from the project. The ownership structure was too unclear, and there was too much corruption involved.

“My granary”. Stefan Tymiec eventually decided not to go through with the purchase. Stefan Tymiec, Free access - no reuse

He was in his early forties at the time, a man in his prime. From then on, he consciously and actively lived between the worlds – between West and East, between building a successful career and a longing to understand his origins.

"Steinort is my original home," he says. "I am a German, ultimately" – he is sure of this today. "But I feel my Germanness is refined by other cultures" – Lithuanian, Polish and Ukrainian.

Most of his accordion repertoire is Polish. Stefan Tymiec also likes to show his guests the Masurian boulder in front of his house and the "Papierówki" ↗ in the garden, "paper apples" from a Polish nursery.

Stefan Tymiec Senior (100) and Stefan Tymiec Junior (70) in front of the Masurian boulder.
Ulla Lachauer, Free access - no reuse

Eight years ago, he brought his elderly father to live with him in Wuppertal. Through him, the Ukrainian past has become a tangible presence in everyday life – Horyniec, the old village in the Carpathian foothills. "My father took me in his arms when I was born," says Stefan Tymiec Junior, "and he will die in my arms."

English translation: William Connor ↗

Footnotes

1. The conversation took place in early August 2020. ↥
2. On the history of Słubice there was an interesting series of lectures (in German). See: https://www.kulturforum.info/de/termine-main-menu/veranstaltungen/1023627-von-sibirien-nach-slubice ↥

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