## Jan Kaminski



*Jan aged 14*

Born in 1932 in Biłgoraj, eastern Poland, Jan Kaminski was seven years old when the Nazis invaded his country. He was the second eldest of a Jewish family of two boys and two girls. When the Germans raided the city centre in pursuit of its Jewish population, Jan watched them herd those they caught into a park, its perimeter fenced with barbed wire. From a raised balcony, troops fired into the dense crowd below. In terror, Jan ran from the town, leaving his family behind.

From then on, the seven-year-old Jan adopted a non-Jewish identity, which he would retain for the greater part of his life. He worked on small farms in return for room and board, moving on whenever he felt that anyone suspected he was a Jew. Eventually, Jan was caught along with the farming family he was staying with. He was forced to join a group of Polish children, who were being deported to the west in order to make *lebensraum* (living space) for ethnic Germans. He found himself in a transit camp at Zwierzyniec.

Jan managed to survive a little better than most of his fellow prisoners by delivering food slipped through the fences by generous peasants on the outside, and usually receiving a morsel in return. He was finally put on a transport to Germany but once again, he escaped, aided somewhat by the Polish resistance.

Taken in by a tailor, he lived with the family and was apprenticed in that trade. Some time later in 1941, a group of boys at a youth holiday camp discovered that Jan was Jewish. They left one boy to guard him while the others went to inform the German guards. This boy took pity on the young Jan and gave him the chance to run.

Once again Jan found himself wandering from farm to farm, doing odd jobs in order to survive. By 1944 he had made his way to Lublin, into which the Allied forces were advancing. Spotting a unit of Polish soldiers attached to the Russian army, Jan begged them to take him on, which they did. He became th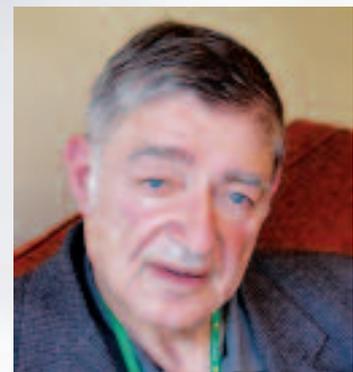e mascot of the 21st Artillery Regiment of the Polish army. He accompanied that regiment to the Czech–German border, where he joined another unit on its way to Murnau in south-eastern Germany. By this time the war had ended and the United Nations had set up a school in the camp. Jan began his education there at the age of thirteen.

With soldiers of the British army's Polish Corps, Jan travelled to Porto San Giorgio, Italy, en route to England. There he began to make some money by trading and was able to start saving. When he finally arrived in Britain Jan trained in the navy college at Petworth, West Sussex, but soon became restless and used the money he had saved to go to London.

Zofia Sarnowska, the manager of the Polish YMCA in Sloane Square, took an interest in Jan and decided to sponsor his education. He learned English in London, then studied in Surrey and in Edinburgh. Returning to London, he found another guardian in the guise of the Chancellor of the Dutch embassy, van Karnebeek. Again Jan was persuaded to continue his education. He passed his GCE exams in seven subjects at the Regent Street Polytechnic. Through a Catholic agency called Veritas, he obtained a scholarship in 1954 to study in Ireland at Cork University. Jan found that most of his friends were in Trinity College, Dublin, so he took the entrance exam and transferred to Trinity, where he studied Economics and Politics. When he graduated at the end of the 1950s, he was granted an Irish passport.

He went to work in the nascent computer industry, with the company ICT, for several years. His long and diverse business career has also included owning a restaurant, a night club, a travel business and hotel and property development in Ireland, Poland and Spain.

Jan lives in Clonskeagh in Dublin and remains keenly aware of his Polish and Jewish roots. He retired in 2006 but is still active in the Polish community in Ireland.



*Photograph: Alicia McAuley*

*Jan Kaminski today*