

Before the Munich Conference, Stalin worked surreptitiously to push the Western powers into a war with Germany over Hitler's demands for Czechoslovakia's surrender of the Sudetenland. Having failed to get the European war he wanted started, he took up a different tactic to achieve his goal.

In the fall of 1938, Stalin quietly opened efforts to close-up with Germany and Poland. His effort toward Poland was directed toward disarming its long-held fears of Soviet aggression westward. Toward Germany, which he had long bombarded with propagandistic vitriol (as he did Italy and Japan), he suddenly sent diplomatic feelers suggesting the reopening of trade negotiations he had long stalled: Germany armaments and technical products to be exchanged for raw materials, petroleum and foodstuffs. His idea was to suggest to Hitler that a friendly Soviet Union in the east would back Hitler's quest for hegemony in the west of Europe – a quest abundant Soviet deliveries would assist, should Hitler need to gain his ends by military means against the British and French. They resisted the prospect of German domination on the northern half of the Continent west of the Soviet border.

The Nazi diplomats, Hitler and Ribbentrop, took Stalin's proffered bait, Ribbentrop in the lead. As Stalin expected, the trade talks expanded to secret diplomatic talks. During them Stalin offered to help the Nazi boss throttle Poland, which also objected to a future Nazi hegemony, and was a long-time ally of France.

The Hitler-Stalin Pact of Aug. 23, 1939, with its secret Protocol, guaranteed that the two dictators would combine to destroy Poland militarily, then divide it between them. Hitler also agreed to the Soviet Union forcing its hegemony on the other states along the Soviet western border, part or all of which Stalin annexed.

Both powers attacked Poland, Germany on Sept. 1, the USSR 16 days later. By agreement the eastern half of defeated Poland was assigned to the Soviets, the western half to Germany.

Andrzej Wirth's father was a ranking officer in the Polish army. Following the Polish defeat, he escaped to Britain. But, when the war began, Andrzej, his mother and other close family members had fled Warsaw to family homes in what was to become the Soviet zone of occupation. The secret agreements leading to the joint war on Poland provided for citizens of both occupation zones to repatriate to the zone where they had legal residence. Eventually Andrzej and his mother succeeded in getting back to Warsaw. The Soviets meanwhile took over and destroyed the family estates in the east, in territory they soon annexed to the Ukrainian SSR.

By escaping to the west, Andrzej's father was not caught a prisoner in either the Nazi or Soviet zone. He thereby possibly eluded the Soviet massacre of 20,000 or so Polish war prisoners and police officers, the massacres so grimly portrayed in Andrzej Wajda's film "Katyn."

Other Polish citizens in the east, Jews and Poles, the latter long the victims of Stalin's secret genocidal efforts to eradicate potential domestic opponents of non-Russian ethnicity, were forcibly shipped in deep winter in boxcars, thousands of kilometers, to Siberia. Over half perished underway, or

in the harsh conditions they encountered during the forced exile. Such would likely have been the fate of the Wirths had they been unable to repatriate to German-controlled Warsaw.