

Aleksander Guterch's Family Background. How the Natural Resources of Oil Shaped Individual Lives

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FOREWORD 1

by Anna Dziembowska, co-editor of the publication

Looking over the family tree of Aleksander Guterch it's no surprise why he chose the field of science he did. His interest in the mysteries of the Earth's crust must have been inherited from his ancestors since nearly all of them were engaged in oil exploration. The smell of oil around must have added to it. We are presenting here some information about the families of Aleksander's mother and father, focusing on their work in oil exploration not only in their neighborhood but also in other continents.

FOREWORD 2

by Barbara Guterch, Aleksander's wife

Half a year after the death of my husband Aleksander, I drove to Sękowa, the place of his birth and burial. The seat next to me in the car was empty but in my memories Aleksander was telling me about his childhood, his family, about the hard work on the farm, about the fields smelling of hay and oil, and about the bullets cluttering the ground, mute witnesses of the Great Gorlice Battle (2 May – 22 June 1915).

I was asked by the Editors to gather materials about Aleksander's family. It was not easy, especially concerning the ancestors of his father. The parents' generation is known only fragmentarily, and the grandparents' generation is drowning in general forgetfulness. Aleksander has never met any of his grandparents. The average life expectancy in Eastern Galicia¹, at the turn of the 20th century, was 27 years, and salaries were up to 85% lower than in other countries in Europe at that time. Józef Rączkowski (1969), born in Siary in 1885, a poet, writer, and member of the Parliament of the Second Polish Republic, describes in his memoirs the hard life of peasants of these abandoned Gorlice villages and their extremely poor diet. Time was counted by the rhythm of the sun and great cataclysms. The Great Battle of Gorlice left behind a completely devastated town, burned villages, and a destroyed oil industry that has never again

¹ Part of the southern lands of Poland seized by Austria in 1772, called Galicia, was ruled by the Habsburg Monarchy (until 1804), Austrian Empire (1804–1867), and Austria-Hungary Monarchy (1867–1918); *added by the editors.*

recovered to its former glory. Agriculture was the main source of livelihood. The mountainous terrain and heavy, clay soil required great effort, but people were extremely attached to their homeland. They always dreamed of extending their property, and some of them, fortunate enough to get well-paid contracts, were able to realize this dream. After 1852, when oil in the Outer Western Carpathians started to be exploited on an industrial scale, the life of Gorlice village people changed essentially. Most of them started to work twice as much as before. They found employment in the oil industry and tried to run their usual farming duties as before.

I asked Aleksander's distant relatives to help me and be co-authors of the text. Szczepan Mikruta from Siary has been collecting and publishing information about the people of the region for decades (Mikruta 2021). Agata Rączkowska from Sękowa has been carefully listening to and recording the stories told by her great-grandmother Helena Gutterch, née Haluch, and her grandmother Barbara Szloch, née Gutterch.

FAMILIES OF ALEKSANDER'S PARENTS, HELENA NÉE HALUCH AND JAN GUTTERCH²

Helena née Haluch and Jan Gutterch came from two neighboring villages. The Haluch family was from the village named Siary, located along the Siarka Creek, and the Gutterch family was from the village Sękowa, located along the valley of Sękówka River, a tributary to the Ropa River (in Polish, "ropa" means "oil"). The two villages formed one parish. It was the southernmost Roman Catholic parish in the area; farther south the population was Greek Catholic.

I. The Haluch family

The Haluch family lived in the village Siary, mainly the Upper Siary (Siary Górne) and its abutment called Empty Field (Puste Pole). The forest adjacent to it is called Empty Forest (Pusty Las).

In the Upper Siary, oil has been present always. It leaked spontaneously from rock crevices and the ground, flowed into streams, painted rainbow circles on the water surface, made well water peculiar in taste and smell, and gave it an undesirable greasiness. At places where oil leaked and flowed into larger depressions, the water was frothy, forming an abundant thick foam. When needed, artificial depressions or ditches were dug and oil was drawn from them by various vessels. When these shallow resources were depleted, people began digging shallow wells, known as oil wells, from which the oil was drawn by buckets, suspended on hemp ropes (Pabis 2001; Pudło and Sę 2010). The Haluch family exploited oil wells in the Empty Field and the nearby Empty Forest as early as the 18th century.

So little is preserved in human memory. It is only individuals who stand out for their creativity, impressive to others, that emerge from the common oblivion. Aleksander's great-grandfather Franciszek was certainly such a person.

Franciszek Haluch, born in 1813, known as a "Peasant from Siary" (Włóścianin z Siar), or "Oiler" (Ropiarz or Ropniak). According to reports from local oilmen, he was selling oil as far away as Sieradz and Poznań, as well as to nearby Slovakia and Hungary. Franciszek Haluch founded one of the stone statues on the fence of the Corpus Christi collegiate church in Biecz (Fig. 1), which indicates that he was a wealthy person. It is said that Ignacy Łukasiewicz, pioneer of the oil industry in Europe and inventor of the kerosene lamp, was using his oil for his experiments (Pabis 1996).

² The surname Guterch was spelled without any rule: Gutter, Guter, Gutterch, Gütterch, or Guterch. It seems that each person producing a formal document wrote down the name as he/she heard it.



Fig. 1. Stone figures of 12 Apostles on the fence of the Corpus Christi collegiate church in Biecz. Inscription on the statue of St. Andrew the Apostle: “Founder Franciszek Haluch from Siary 1868”.

After 1852, when Prince Stanisław Jabłonowski established an oil shaft in the Empty Field (on the border between Sękowa and Siary) and acquired a significant oil yield, interest in oil and an influx of rich entrepreneurs grew rapidly. This proudly named oil shaft, probably the first oil shaft in the world, was in fact an 11.5-fathom³ deep oil well dug like a water well, and embanked with wood. People began digging everywhere, predominantly in places where spontaneous oil flow was observed in the past. The Haluchs lived in the center of these events, so it's no surprise that Franciszek Haluch, having the experience and finances, started the oil exploitation already on an industrial scale.

In the year 1874, the area of Siary alone was a site of 155 shafts (Windakiewicz 1875). Franciszek Haluch owned 8 of them, which was the greatest number of shafts possessed by a local peasant. As mining proceeded, the depths of exploitable oil were rapidly increasing: from 12–20 fathoms in the 1850s to 50–70 fathoms in 1874. In the 1870s, deeper digging was not possible, even with the use of dynamite, so drilling was more and more common.

A survey of oil areas in Galicia in 1881 done by Stanisław Znamirowski (Pabis 1996) showed that Franciszek Haluch stopped investing but kept exploiting the wells already in existence.

Józef Haluch (1839–1917), son of Franciszek. From an early age, worked on digging oil wells and then oil shafts; many oilmen underwent practical training with him. He was regarded a specialist among oilmen of the time. He did not exploit the oil wells himself but was leasing the land he owed.

³ A fathom (sążen) is a unit of length; in our case, a Viennese fathom = 1.90 m is applicable.

Jan Haluch (born in 1875), son of Józef. Gained experience in the oil industry from a young age, was hired as a qualified driller to work in the Netherlands Indies, and employed on Sumatra in the early 1920s. Having returned from Sumatra, he invited his neighbors to an inn to celebrate this happy event, and bought a big bag of sugar for his home. To the peasants of these Gorlice villages, this bag of sugar was, at those times, an incredible luxury, as memorized by Aleksander's mother.

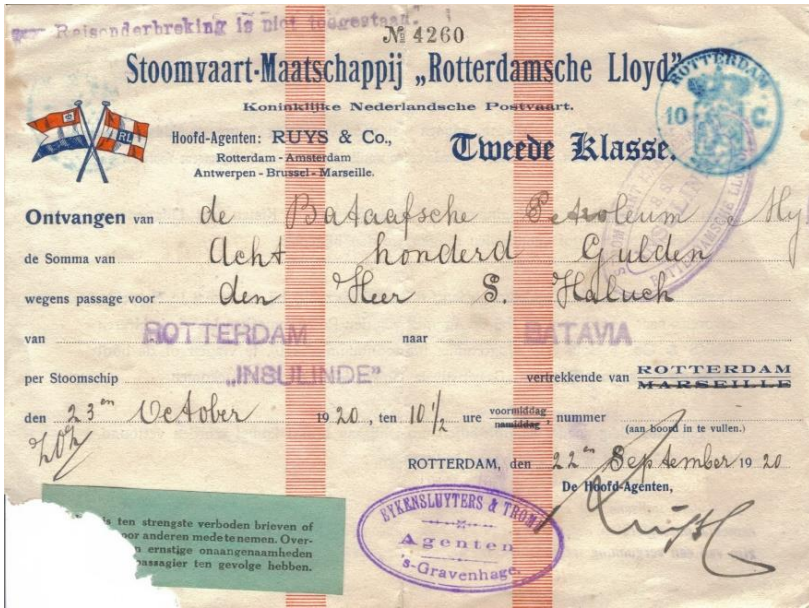
Józef Haluch (1865–1921), son of Szymon Haluch and Anna née Gutter. As an experienced driller, he was employed by a Dutch company in Borneo. With the money he earned, he bought some land in Siary and built, in 1904, a large brick house, impressive for that time. Not far away, an ancestral, wood-cased oil well was still present, making it possible to draw a small amount of oil as late as 1995.

Stanisław Haluch (1878–1958), son of Józef. At the age of 16, he started working in the oil industry in Borysław, receiving a drilling master's diploma in 1903. Drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army, took part in World War I in the rank of non-commissioned officer. In 1916–1917, he served in the Józef Piłsudski Staff of the Polish Legion. In 1920–1928, he worked in Borneo and Java, Netherlands India (see Figs. 2a,b, and 3). With the money he earned, he revitalized the inactive oil wells on his property in Siary and set up a private oil mine "Halina". Arrested by the Gestapo in 1943, he was imprisoned in Jasło. As a prisoner, he took part in the Home Army's action to liberate political prisoners. He was an active participant in the country's social and political life. He was interested in agriculture and, cooperating with the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, conducted agricultural and horticultural experiments on his farm. Before 1939, he graduated from the Higher Agricultural Courses named after Stanisław Staszic (Haluch 2024; Pabis 1996).

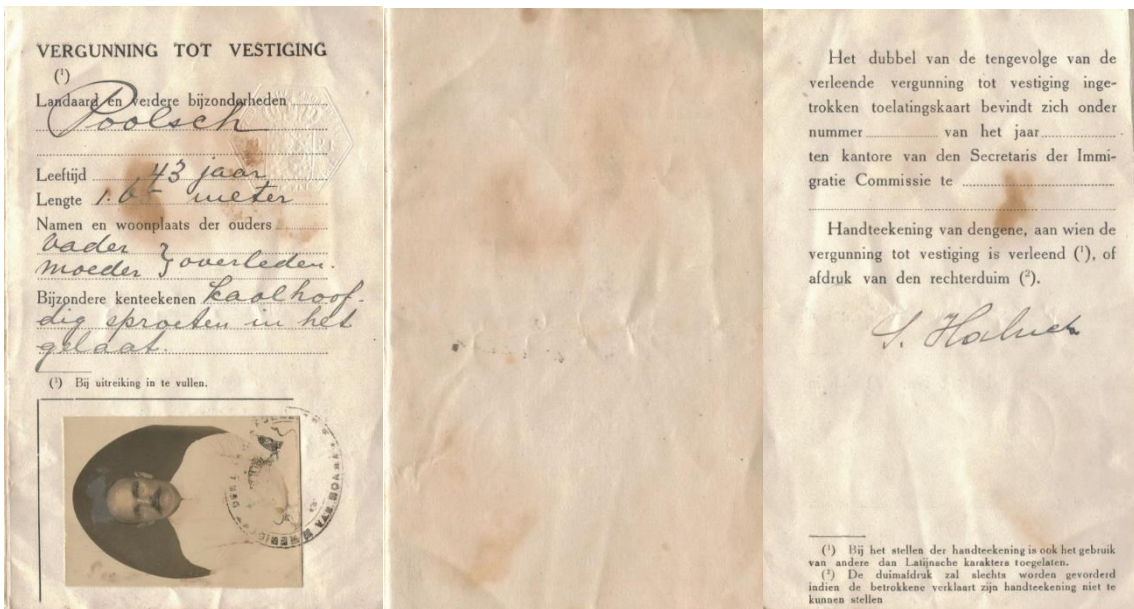
Michał Haluch (1883-1935). Having started as a yard worker, he later became a drill assistant. In 1914, mobilized into the Austro-Hungarian army, he was taken prisoner by the Russians. After the return from captivity, in 1919, he went to Ecuador to work in oil prospecting. After several years, he returned to his country and became employed as a driller in Borysław, then in Kryg (Pabis 1996).

Franciszek Haluch (1894–1963), son of Piotr Haluch and Ludwika née Mikruta. Born in Siary, but when he was nine the whole family moved to Borysław, where his father began working in the oil industry. Franciszek was brought up and educated in Borysław. He was a co-initiator of the action to establish a Great Borysław. He was a member of the Mining Workers' Union authorities, holding various positions, including that of the Secretary. He was a delegate to the International Mining Congresses and a member of their executive committee. A leading activist of the Polish Socialist Party in the Borysław oil district and the Society of Workers' Universities.

After the Soviet Army invaded Poland in September 1939, he was arrested by the Soviet Secret Service (NKWD) and jailed in the Drohobycz prison. Deported to Siberia, he worked in a gold mine in Kolyma. Upon the agreement between the Polish government in London and the USSR, he was released from the gulag and joined the Polish Army formed in the USSR in 1942, with which he went to Iraq. In 1942–1944, on behalf of the Polish Government-in-exile, he was in charge of organizing the care of Poles arriving in Iraq from the USSR, creating schools and hospitals, and reactivating Polish cultural life. Since 1944 worked at the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare at the Polish Government-in-Exile in London (Belczyk 2010; Mikruta 2011).



(a)



(b)



Fig. 2. Stanislaw Haluch's travel documents, including: (a) ticket for his trip from Rotterdam to Batavia (now Jakarta) in 1920, and (b) visa issued at the Nederlands India (part of this document is stained with oil).



Fig. 3. Polish management of a mine in Borneo. Stanisław Haluch is sitting in the center, accompanied, most probably, by Kacper Sternal (on the left) and Józef Haluch (on the right). Local servants are standing behind the table (the photo from the archives of Bogusław Haluch, provided by Aleksander Gucwa).

II. The Guterch family

The history of the Guterch family is much less known, even concerning its members relatively close to us. The generation of Jan Gutterch (Aleksander's father), is known only fragmentarily. The Guterchs lived in Sękowa, where spontaneously flowing rock oil was also observed, but not in such quantities as in Siary. The oil deposits were deeper, and it was only after the year 1852 that the oil industry developed there rapidly.

Jan Gutterch (1885–1941), Aleksander's father, came from a large farm. The family had 11 children. At least four of Jan's brothers worked in the oil industry, and two emigrated to the US. Jan Gutterch (Fig. 4) was a farmer and petroleum worker, like most of the farmers there. He inherited the farm from his father. Daily chores were mainly handled by the wife and children, there were no Sundays or vacations for them. The sight of a 12-year-old or even a 10-year-old boy with a sickle or scythe at harvest surprised no one. Jan worked in the oil industry at all levels, starting from auxiliary work on the construction of oil wells and their operation in



Fig. 4. Jan Gutterch, photo taken in Borysław (family collection).

Sękowa and Harkłowa to the position of a driller in Borysław (Fig. 4). The labor certificate of Jan Gutterch, issued by the Galizische Naphta-Gewerkschaft “HARKŁOWA” in Harkłowa on 18 June 1918 is presented in Fig. 5. There was also a drilling shaft at Jan’s field. With the money he earned in oil industry, he built a brick house, one of the first in Sękowa. His last will expressed to his wife Helena was a request to educate their youngest son Aleksander, which she fulfilled with great determination. Aleksander memorized his father, already seriously ill, embracing him and showing German army units marching from Slovakia to Poland in September 1939. This was how Jan’s life came to a dramatic end and Aleksander’s conscious life began.

Jan was married twice: to Bronisława née Zielińska (1890–1921) and Helena née Haluch (1895–1984). All children of Jan except of Bronisław and Aleksander were traditionally farmers. At the same time, men worked all their lives in the oil industry, even starting at the age of 15. Women took care of the house and farm.

Children of Jan and Bronisława, Aleksander half-siblings:

Władysław Gutterch (1910–1990), a driller (Sitek 2014) with extensive professional experience. Called up to the Polish Army, took part in the fighting in Podkarpacie in September 1939. Taken prisoner of war and deported to Germany, where he was forced to work for a German farmer.

Katarzyna Kret née Guterch (1912–1997). Franciszek Kret, Katarzyna’s husband, was a farmer, who owned horses and shared them with the neighbors in need. Thanks to people like Franciszek, others were able to work in industry and run small farms.

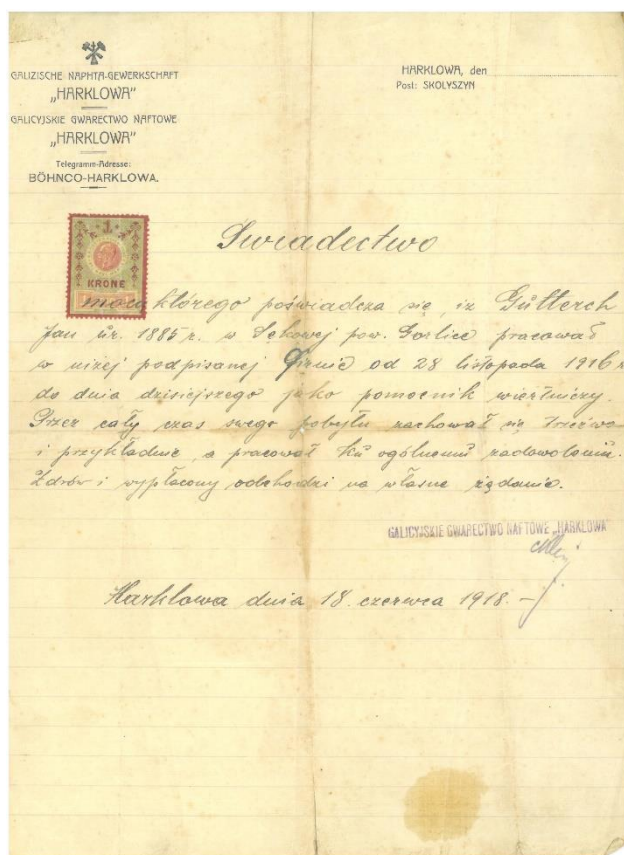


Fig. 5. Jan Gutterch's work certificate issued by Galizische Naphta-Gewerkschaft "HARKLOWA" in Harklowa on 18 June 1918 (family collection).

Julia Tokarczyk née Guterch (1915–2013). Władysław Tokarczyk, Julia's husband, worked in the Borysław Oil Basin for 30 years, and then in the oil mines in Sękowa. Aleksander enjoyed visiting his sister's home, listening to Władysław's stories about the world, and borrowing books from him. Their son Krzysztof continued the family tradition, and worked for 35 years at the Glinik Machine and Drilling Equipment Factory in Gorlice.

Kazimierz Gutterch (1917–2002) a drilling manager at Jasło Drilling Company (Sitek 2014). During the German occupation of Poland, he set up a camouflaged oil distillery in the house where he lived to obtain kerosene for his family and friends. This was an extremely dangerous practice, because of the threat of fire and, if exposed, the death penalty. Czesław Guterch, his son, continued the family tradition; he was a drilling manager at the Jasło Drilling Company (Sitek 2014).

Mieczysław Gutterch (1919–1998) a drilling manager at Jasło Drilling Company, enjoying great prestige among his superiors and crew (Sitek 2014). In September 1939 he was a soldier in the National Defense Battalion in Gorlice and took part in the fighting in Podkarpacie. Taken prisoner, escaped from a transport to Germany and returned home. During the German occupation, he was a soldier in the Peasant Battalions, which carried out sabotage actions in the area. They set out to help fighters in the Warsaw Uprising, but turned back upon hearing of the cease-fire in Warsaw.

Bronisław Gutterch (1921–2002) was a practical skill teacher and ran Workshops at the Ignacy Łukasiewicz Mechanical School Complex in Gorlice.

After the tragic death of his wife Bronisława, Jan Gutterch married, in 1924, Helena, a daughter of Józef Haluch and Anna nee Mikruta, who raised his six small kids and gave birth to four more, the youngest being Aleksander (her photo with Aleksander is in Fig. 6).

Children of Jan and Helena, Aleksander siblings:

Barbara Szloch née Guterch (1925–2013). The property of Barbara and Edward Szloch was, in part, a site of the “Appolówka” oil mine, and the house hosted the mine’s office. Edward worked in the oil industry only in the 1940s. He had horses and shared them with the neighbours who needed it. Barbara was the person who memorized most of the family stories, and the biggest beneficiaries of her storytelling were her daughter Halina Godkowicz and granddaughter Agata Rączkowska.

Józef Guterch (1927–2010), a driller, working, since 1965, at the Glinik Drilling and Mining Machinery Factory in Gorlice, in the Quality Control Department. He was an outstanding technician, often called by coal mines in Silesia for activating or repairing the underground mining equipment. He has also been assigned for extended stays abroad for deploying Polish-made drilling equipment and training crews on-site.

Michał Guterch, Józef’s grandson, is now the only one to continue the family’s petroleum traditions, having graduated from AGH University of Science and Technology, Faculty of Drilling, Oil and Gas, majoring in Mining and Geology. Then he was employed as an assistant drilling rig manager at the Exalo Drilling Orlen Group.



Fig. 6. Helena Gutterch with her son Aleksander on the day of his First Holy Communion, Sękowa, May 1944 (family collection).

Tadeusz Guterch (1929–1997), a driller who possessed the title of first-degree miner. From 1965 to 1976, he worked at the Glinik Drilling and Mining Machinery Factory in Gorlice.

EPILOGUE

Back in the 1970s, bread was baked in every Sękowa home, usually from the own grains. Groceries were bought only as an absolute necessity. Cows, pigs, chickens and sometimes sheep were raised, while goats were never kept. The local store did not even sell products such as dairy, bread, eggs, and vegetables. Since men commonly worked in the mining and prospecting industries, the farms were mainly attended by women and children, once they grew enough to be useful.

Currently, the land is no longer cultivated by anyone. The fields are only mowed and the grass is sold. The sight of a grazing cow arouses amazement and curiosity. Old houses are becoming empty, and new residents, primarily from the cities, seeking quiet and scenic beauty, are building modern houses that meet all the requirements of modern technology. Sękowa has become a village of typically recreational character.

Oil exploration in the Carpathian region in Poland became a history. In Gorlice, on the site of a former oil mine, there operates the Magdalena Oil Industry Open-Air Museum, collecting memorabilia related to oil production in the Gorlice Oil Industry Basin. Siary and Sękowa are on the way of the Carpathian-Galician Petroleum Tourist Route, which begins in Gorlice and continues east through Jasło and Sanok into Ukraine, to Borysław and Drohobycz.

Yet oil reminded of its existence once again. On 20 April 2019, the field belonging to Tadeusz Rączkowski in Sękowa experienced an eruption, a mixture of brine, gas, and oil from the formerly operated well “Franciszek”, which was shut down and plugged in 1995. The leak continues to be active and is under constant monitoring by the services. All of the old shafts, with special attention to dug pits, have been closed down and protected for safety reasons (Wais 2014).

On a gloomy January day, when we escorted Aleksander out of St. Joseph’s Church in Sękowa, which was built up from the funds obtained from oil production nearby, a rainbow appeared in the sky, like a joyful welcome to Aleksander returning from a long journey.

In March 2024, the elementary school in Sękowa got the name of “Pioneers of the Oil Industry” (Wieści Gminne 2024).

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