Bronisław Gelibter

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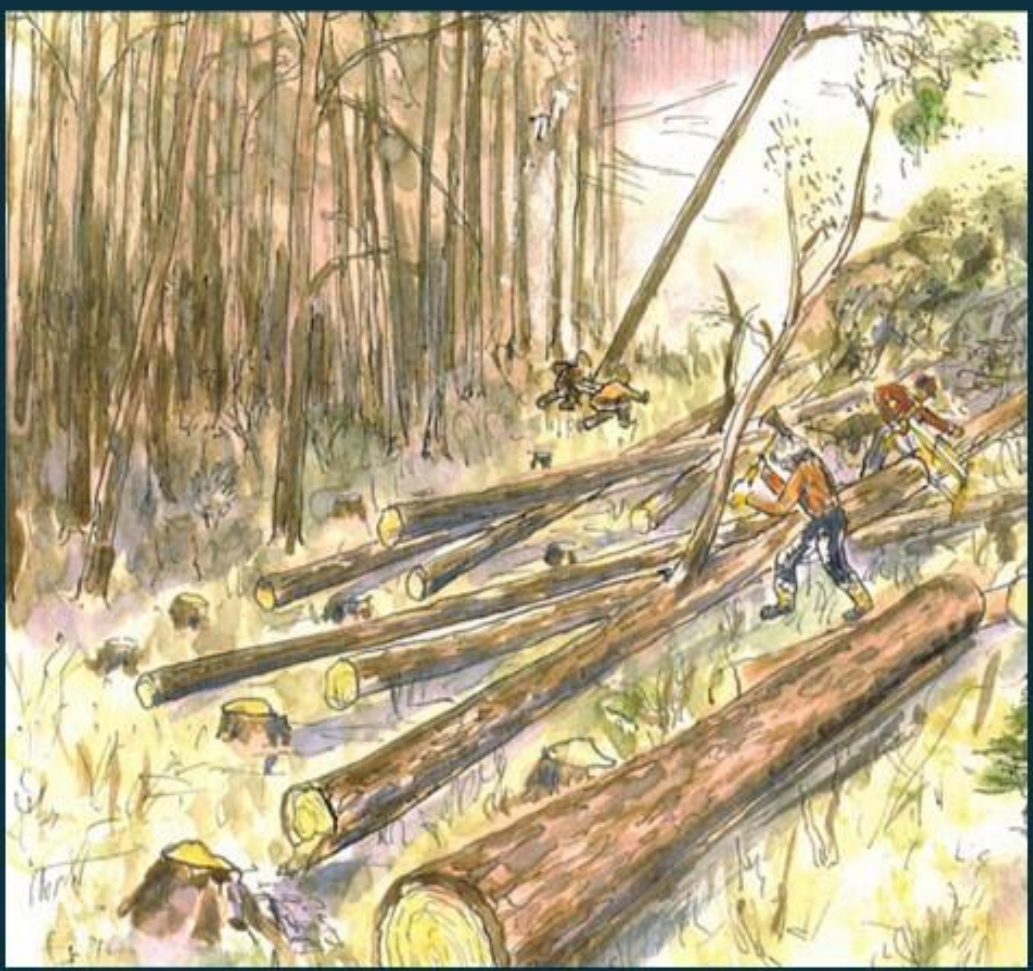
Soviet Union 1939 to 1945

and

Poland 1946 - 1969



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Memoirs

of

Bronisław (Bronek) Gelibter

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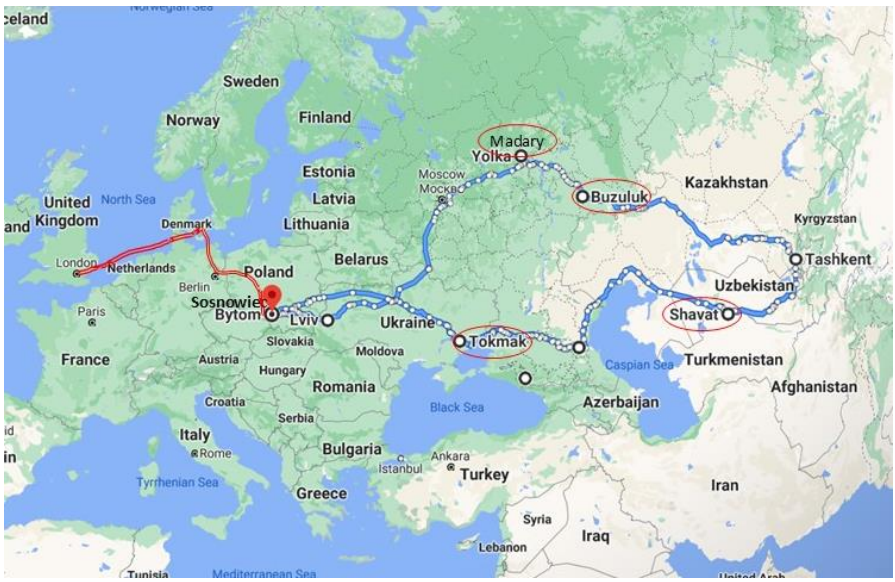
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Foreword

My name is Tom Gelibter, and I am the author's son. I have published my father's story to make it easier to share it with friends and relatives. I live in London and will always be happy to hear from you. My email address is tomgelibter@gmail.com

My Father wrote the story of a significant part of his life in two parts. The first part covering his six-year exile in the Soviet Union during 1939 – 1945, starting with the escape from Warsaw in September 1939 as the Nazis invaded Poland and the subsequent six-year journey, initially to the southeastern city of Lwów (Lviv) and then further away from the front line into Siberia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and finally back to Poland in 1946. He provides a few of his own illustrations of the more memorable moments and a few photographs from that time.

He left his home in Sosnowiec in southern Poland when he was 16 years old and returned at 22, having spent six years working in the Siberian forests, and later as a tractor repair mechanic in Uzbekistan.

On return in 1946 he settled in Bytom, a mining town in Upper Silesia in southern Poland, close to where he was born, met my mother and life continued as for millions of other Poles until 1969 when the Family felt threatened yet again. This was a start of another journey that ended in London, where he died in 2008 age 86. My mother died in 2020; they were married for 56 years.

Coincidentally I was also 16 when we left Poland, but that's another story. The last few chapters talk about the post war period and the lead up to our departure in 1969.

Personal Note

I realise that my English is primitive and clumsy, my vocabulary limited and the grammar far from perfect! But I am not attempting to write a literary work.

This is a testimony of my war time experience, written by me in the same style as I would narrate it. I think that for those who are interested, reading this provides an advantage, as one can stop reading at any time and later continue or not, without concern for the narrator. I won't even know and will not feel offended...

So, you have been warned!

PS

I wrote it in response to my Family's reaction of "Why don't you write it down? Your grandchildren or even their children may one day want to know a bit more about you". Such words usually followed my telling them a story or two from my past.

As it is rather unlikely that they will speak Polish, I am trying my best in English.

God, forgive me and help them!!

To Sophia, Carl and Max.

Enfield, March 1999

Bronek

Introduction

Dąbrowa Basin (Zagłębie Dąbrowskie), with its main town Sosnowiec, and the adjoining Upper Silesia, with its provincial capital Katowice, are regions of Poland rich in coal. Although both regions developed thanks to the coal mining and steel industry, their histories are completely different.

Upper Silesia for centuries kept changing hands between Poland and Germany. However, during all the divisions and border changes Dąbrowa Basin always remained Polish, except for a period, when resulting from partitioning of Poland in the eighteenth century, it belonged to the Empire of Russia till the end of WW1. The collapse of Russia, Prussia and Austria, and the creation of an independent Poland in 1918 set new national borders one more time.

The coal was mined there since the beginning of the nineteenth century, but the opening in 1860 of a new railway line Warsaw -Vienna, rapidly accelerated not only the already fast-growing mining industry but also steelworks, chemical and textile manufacturing. Industry demanded more service facilities, such as banks, telephone exchanges and communications. All this required more people, more housing, shops, schools etc.

Within 30-40 years, mining villages and some small towns, were transformed into towns with population around, and over 100 000 inhabitants each. The whole area is densely populated. On about 3000 sq. km there are at least a dozen large towns and many smaller ones, some of which almost merged into one big cluster of industrial urban area.

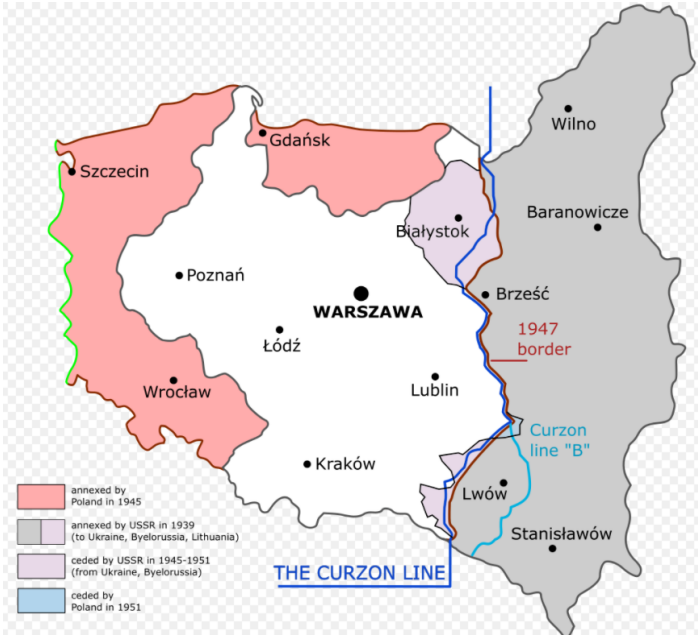
Sosnowiec, where my parents settled shortly after the end of WW1 is one of the bigger towns that was always on the Polish side of the border. I was born there as were my two older brothers, Ludwig (Lutek) and Adam. We grew up, went to school, and lived there until the 1st of September 1939.

After the end of the 1st World War in 1918, there were two successive uprisings, and the Polish German frontier in this region was finally established after plebiscite in 1921. Thus, the part of Upper Silesia, with towns like Gliwice (Gleiwitz), Zabrze (Hindenburg), Bytom (Beuthen) and several smaller places, were left on the German side while Katowice, Chorzów and others were allocated to Poland. It was not an ideal solution, but it was acceptable to both sides, at least for now.

In 1933 Hitler gained power in Germany and started his dictatorial reign of terror. He broke the rules of the Versailles Treaty forbidding Germans to have an army and a navy beyond certain level of strength. He ignored the limits imposed on Germany and started to build mighty modern battleships, tanks, bombers and fighter planes.

In 1938, with an already powerful army, he annexed Austria. Few months later his army invaded neighbouring Czechoslovakia and occupied part of it, and after another few months he annexed the whole of that country.

The already dark clouds over Europe and Poland in particular, looked ever more ominous.



Apart from the Upper Silesia region there was another part of Poland, the so called "corridor", which Hitler contested more and more frequently and every time more aggressively. This was a comparatively narrow strip of land (about 40km wide) and Poland's only access to the Baltic Sea, allocated to her by the Versailles Treaty. Unfortunately, it divided Germany from its East Prussia and Danzig-Gdansk, which was then a "Free-Town" administered jointly by Poles and Germans. Although Germany, subject to some regulations, had unrestricted access to East-Prussia by rail and by road, it was not good enough for them and Hitler openly threatened to retrieve this "corridor" by force! The whole of Europe, and especially the Poles on the front line, were terrified by the prospect. Many people however still hoped that in the end Hitler would withdraw his demands.

Soon it became apparent that the optimists were completely wrong and the inevitable had materialised! Knowing how inhuman Nazis were towards the Jews in Germany, Polish Jews could not exclude the eventuality of finding themselves in German hands and were especially horrified! And this is why, living in Sosnowiec, then just 20 km from the German border, the only sensible and possible move for us was to join tens of thousands of others, Jews and Poles alike, leaving our hometown and fleeing further away, to the eastern part of Poland.

The Family

My family during the last few days of August 1939, preceding the outbreak of the war.

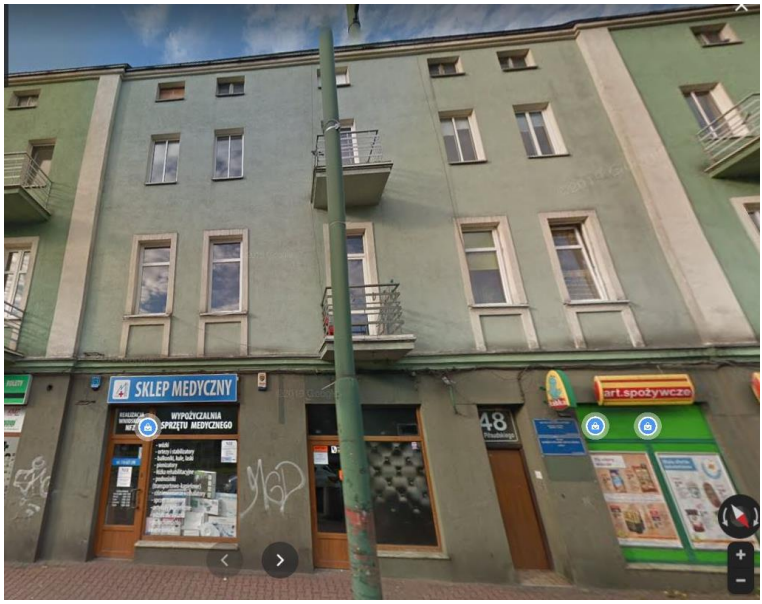
Father - **Maks**, 56, at home in Sosnowiec, working in administration office at Sanitary Ware Company

Mother - **Regina**, 51, anticipating the imminent war, takes a few suitcases with some essentials and travels to her hometown Radom in case the rest of the family will need to join her there.

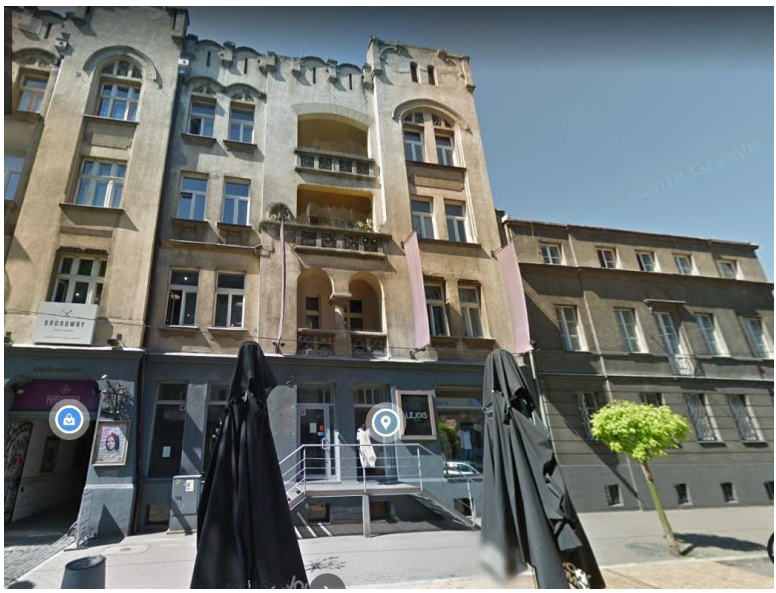
Brothers - **Lutek**, 26, Law graduate, at home, a volunteer to the Civic Air Defence, waiting to be called up to the army.

Adaś, 22, in Paris, studying. He has been ordered by parents to not come back home, so long as the danger of the war still existed.

Me - (**Bronek**), 16, for the last 2 weeks on a camping holiday in Skawa near Krakow, with a group of Jewish Scouts.



ul. Piłsudskiego – where I was born



ul. Małachowskiego 9 – where we lived in 1939

Our school – Liceum Staszica

Sosnowiec 1939, with my dog Jim

End of August 1939

I am having a fantastic, lovely time! The weather is hot, the company is excellent, boys and girls, all good friends since long ago. We behaved there like young children despite that we were all roughly 16 years old.

I am sure, not one of us was concerned too much with the tense political situation. Not, that we did not know what was going on in the world, but simply, we thought that it was not our problem - let them, the old generation, worry!

Camping with the scouts

And then, it appeared that, the problem also affected us all and me too! Suddenly an urgent telegram arrived from my Father, telling me to leave Skawa at once and go to my aunt Edzia in Warsaw! Others also must have received similar news from home because the mood became very different from before!

So, next day, I am on a train to Warsaw. I must say, I did not feel too comfortable, sitting in a crowded compartment in my scout uniform, listening to the discussions and answering questions...not everyone

pleasant to me. There was a lot of talk about possible war, not all quite sensible...

In Warsaw aunt Edzia was waiting for me on the platform. She explained the reason why I was told to break my holidays and come to her. Well, facing the eventuality of a war, it would be much safer for all of us to be together in Radom, where my mother's sister and their old father lived, rather than in Sosnowiec. So, Mother has already gone to Radom, and Father although still in Sosnowiec, maybe at a very short notice, at any moment in fact, be evacuated with the whole office to Warsaw. It would be rather wiser therefore for me to be here.

with friends

Then, a couple of hours later, after a telephone call from my Father, the plans regarding me have changed. Instead of staying in Warsaw I should go to my uncle Samek in Węgrów, a small provincial town, about 60km east from Warsaw. So, again, wearing my shorts, with a rucksack, rolled up blanket, flask, etc. I was this time on crowded bus to Węgrów.

A few hours later in Węgrów I was embraced by uncle Samek. He was the youngest of all my relatives and I liked him. He was a single man, did not have his own family, a busy local doctor, most of the day away from home. Initially I was pleased to be with Samek who was good-humoured and

telling funny stories but soon I became bored of being on my own most of the time.

I was in Węgrów for the first time. I did not have any friends there. Having nothing else to wear, apart from the shorts of my scout uniform, I was reluctant to go out just to stroll along the streets. In a small provincial town like Węgrów, where everybody knows everybody, I must have been a peculiar stranger. To make any acquaintances, it seemed to me then out of the question. So, I felt rather lonely in my uncle's house.

I have no recollection of how I was spending time there. Vaguely I remember a group of local youth, looking much older than I, taking me once or twice with them to swim in the river. I imagine that they did this reluctantly on my uncle's request and respecting only his authority. Neither I, nor they, really showed any effort to make closer approaches.

So, I rather stayed indoors, contemplating the sudden and abrupt change: only a few days ago a pleasant holiday with a company of good friends, joyful, buzzing mood of a holiday camp, to an almost voluntary confinement in silence. I was waiting for my Father to come, I was home sick, I was fed up, I felt that I was deprived of my friends, of my toys, of my home, of everything that was **mine**!

In the meantime. the political tension intensified with every hour. News brought by the radio and the press were very gloomy and rather apprehensive, but some people still believed that under pressure of England and France, Hitler will give up at the last moment.

Unfortunately, all the international diplomatic efforts were not bringing the expected compromise. Hitler sensing weakness of the western governments was relentless. For some reason, probably not to provoke him, Poland was postponing the official announcement of general mobilisation, though all reservists were already called up to the army. The danger of war was escalating. The country was full of gossip that the German, so called "Fifth Column" was blowing up bridges, that they have their spies everywhere, disguised as policemen, railway workers, even as priests; sabotaging various important objects. There were official posters appealing to the public to be alert to everything looking even remotely suspicious. Although there was no panic, people were preparing themselves for the eventuality

of war, stock-piling staple-food and withdrawing cash from banks, even moving out to safer areas. The general nervousness was spreading fast. More gossip of spies being shot, of Germans being caught while drawing maps, of possible and impossible situations involving the Fifth Column. It is difficult to tell which of all these stories were true and which were a result of over sensitiveness.

In fact, in Poland lived quite many either Poles of German extraction, or just Polonized Germans with Polish citizenship. It soon became apparent that majority of them became Volksdeutchen; closely collaborating with the German authorities and many of them active and most brutal Nazis in the service of Gestapo!

So far everybody was waiting for the inevitable with greatest fear and apprehension. The atmosphere was contagious and the Jews in the first place, no wonder why, were the most petrified of all people.

And then...

Friday, 1st of September 1939.

The worst has happened, sooner than it was expected!

Without any conventions, without diplomatic notes, without declaring a war, Hitler started a massive attack on Poland, on land and from the air!

As an excuse he created a primitive provocation; accused the Polish border guard of crossing into Germany and under the cover of night, assaulting a sentry at the Gleiwitz (Gliwice) radio-station. In retaliation and to defend his "homeland", he had no other option but to send German tanks to defend against Polish" attempts to invade" a peace-loving German nation.

Early in the morning that day, German aeroplanes dropped bombs on several Polish towns, some quite far from the border. There were already first victims, dead and wounded (among them my future mother-in-law in Radomsko, wounded in the head by a splinter of a bomb) many buildings bombed, on fire and in ruins... and that was only the first day, **the first day of the war! How many of them still to come?**

There was some resistance, some skirmishes in places quite heavy, but there was no continuous front line! Wherever they could break a weaker stretch of defence, German tanks were rolling forward fast, regardless of the position of their flanks. This was an unprecedented and new war tactic, causing havoc among the Polish command.

Next morning standing outside uncle's house, I saw a squadron, probably bombers, high up in the sky, an ominous sight! Who were they? Ours? German? They passed as quickly, as they came. So far Węgrów was untouched.

No good news, the Germans bombed more places, there is more damage.

Where are the English? Where is France? Poland has a treaty with them.

Why do they not do anything? Where are our Allies?

News - Our planes bombed Berlin! Good! Some heavy fighting is going on! But is it true?

My Father should arrive any minute now, hope that he will bring me something to wear. I am waiting at the bus stop, very excited.

Yes! This is his bus, at last! Father looks very tired. We are both visibly very moved, embracing each other.

Amazing, how a specific smell, or a tune or even just a name heard, triggers my memory years back. On those occasions I think of my father quite frequently... I knew him so little! Though I have no recollections of him playing ball or romping with me, I do remember him as a warm and caring parent. He was honest, gentle, and righteous and you could rely on his word. As long as I can remember, he was never successful in his business - clients delaying payments - suppliers demanding payment - and him always having financial problems. His virtues, not always helpful in business, in the end forced him to close. Whether the stress of all that was the reason or not, but he developed a heart condition - angina. When after several years of being out of business he found steady employment, his health had clearly improved, but it was clear that any kind of emotion immediately affected him badly.

When I now, already having my own family and being responsible for their well-being, go back to those early days of war I can understand my father's state of mind in Węgrów much better.

The family is dispersed, Lutek's whereabouts are unknown, his job and the only income gone, our home, with all of twenty years possessions left to its fate...and father's deteriorating health!...

Now, I also understand, that the emotions of both of us were different then to me and different to my Father. I was just very happy of his arrival, of having my normal clothes and of the end of being alone. To him, it was more than just coming to his child to bring him home from holidays. To him, first, it must have been only the beginning of a first stage of the family reunion amid so many unknown problems ahead.

Despite that I wanted to tell my Dad so much, to ask him so many questions, somehow, I felt that this is not the best time to do this, so we rather walked to uncle's home not talking too much. Well, there were the typical: "did you enjoy your holiday? Was the food, OK? How was the journey?" etc. etc. But

I knew that he was preoccupied with more important problems, than my holidays. He was enormously happy of having me beside him but what about the rest?

Uncle Samek tried to telephone Lutek but the lines to Sosnowiec were cut off. Edzia also did not have any news from him or from Mother.

Father was becoming increasingly worried!

Radio and newspapers were full of war news. The headlines: "heroic action of our cavalry against German tanks!"," Successful counterattacks!" But it was obvious that the Polish Army will not be able to resist the German war-machine for long.

We already saw the refugees from Mława, Ostrołęka, Łomża - towns close to the border with East Prussia. They came on their horse drawn wagons, with some possessions in bundles and stopped in the marketplace to feed their horses and to rest. All looking bewildered, lost, unable to tell their destination, just wanting to get away from the Germans!

Father decided that there is no point staying in Węgrów any longer and that we should go as soon as possible to Radom via Warsaw.

3 September 1939

We are on the first morning bus to Warsaw. The journey lasts longer than normally. On several occasions we were stopped by the air raid alerts.

On the outskirts of Warsaw clearly visible are the results of bombing. A several storeys high block of flats razed in half, from the roof to the ground, disclosing interiors of rooms, kitchens, bathrooms, still with some pictures on the walls and pieces of furniture balancing on the remaining broken floorboards. It was an absolute shock for me!

I could not stop thinking that there were people living there. What has happened to them? Well, that was my second "first time" war experience - regrettably there will be more of those terrible "first times". My initial "excitements" have been substituted by sheer horror of war... Closer to the centre of Warsaw there were more ruins, more signs of war, war which only just began!

Luckily, my aunt's house, Nr.43 Żelazna Street, where we stopped, was still intact. Thanks to the electricity still working we could listen to the news and to the frequent air-raid warnings on the radio. Also, from the obscure official bulletins we would guess of the front situation.

We knew that there was heavy fighting along the whole length of the frontier and the Germans were meeting strong resistance. But then...suddenly, we heard that the German armoured divisions broke the front in several places and are progressing in all directions. Sosnowiec, our hometown has been taken! Lutek!! What has happened to him? Is he alive? Has he been caught by the Germans?

I can see, that my Father is absolutely broken by the latest news! We trust Lutek's initiative, and hope that after all he has managed to flee and, may be, he is in Radom by now. Unfortunately, there is no possibility at all, to contact Mother by phone. So, the only reasonable step to us is to go to Radom.

We still sincerely hope that at any moment England and France will step in and force Hitler to withdraw and everything will return to normality soon. Minutes later, as we were preparing ourselves to go, we heard a long-awaited announcement on the radio, that the two countries at last declared war with Germany! Hurrah! Now, Poland is not on her own.

The Warsaw main railway station is in absolute chaos. Trains cancelled to most destinations. Timetable does not exist anymore. Platforms overflow with all kinds of luggage, among which are masses of soldiers and civilians, men, and women, old and children, all disorientated, all desperate to leave Warsaw. There is no one who can provide reliable information, besides, as things changed from minute to minute. For sure, and that is certain, there will be **no trains** leaving for Radom, there are **no** trains going South and East.

So, for the time being we are stuck in Warsaw. Without exchanging a word, we are back in Żelazna St., believing that it is not for long. We speculate the possible present situation:

Mother is either in Radom or assuming that Father and I are in Warsaw, she might have left and by now is somewhere on her way to join us here. Lutek,

has either stayed in Sosnowiec and been caught by the Nazis, or fled with others and can be anywhere on his way eastbound.

Adaś, is in France, and certainly he is safer there then here and after all there is Father's family in Paris.

We are all dispersed, and no one knows anything of the others' whereabouts!

4 September 1939

Went with Father to his office representative to find out, if by any chance Mother rang and left any message. On our way back, suddenly sirens announce an air raid. We take cover in a zigzag of trenches dug out specially a week earlier on every possible square in the town. There were other air-shelters in the cellars of some buildings as well. The whole sight of Warsaw has changed enormously in the last few days. Normally well illuminated at night, with lots of colourful neon signs, now completely dark because off black-out. Streets usually full of cars, trams, buses, now empty. The only means of transport now are once very popular horse drawn cabs. There is shortage of petrol, many tram lines are already damaged by the bombs, not all routes are passable, and people rather stay indoors. Not many passers by and if there are some they rush quickly with their business during the all-clear moments. All windowpanes are pasted with criss-crossed tapes, protecting them against breakage, but despite of this many windows were shattered already. Some bakeries manage to make a limited amount of bread and distribute it between people waiting for hours for it in not always orderly queues. Some small restaurants too stay open are offering one course meal only, a thick soup with pieces of meat in it.

5 September 1939

Air-raids, a regular occurrence since the first day of the war, intensify. There are at least five or more of them. Apart from the bombs, big ones, which explode with a bang like a thunder, destroying large buildings, they also drop clusters of small incendiary bombs. These are small, bottle size, canisters filled with highly inflammable materials, able to melt steel, self-igniting on impact. To smother the fire, members of the Civilian Air

Defence were shovelling sand, prepared in quantities on almost every roof. Despite this, many buildings were on fire after every raid. Fire brigade although still on duty, was helpless in most cases. Every day there were less hydrants and useable equipment, more streets ruined by bomb craters, telephone lines often broken, and fire engines immobilised by shortage of petrol.

Radio bulletins do not bring good news at all. The German mechanised divisions captured Leszno and Rawicz, less then 300km west of Warsaw, and are progressing to Bydgoszcz and Grudziądz! They are also moving fast in the direction of Warsaw from the south. It is very difficult to establish how far away they are. Their tactic is to break the resistance in one point and then move their tanks forward, regardless of the position of other units. There is no regular front line - thus conflicting information of their whereabouts. According to some unofficial sources they are not far from Radom. Everything is very disturbing! Worse, because contrary to our expectation, there is no actions by our allies in the West! And if there is any, it does not change anything for us.

In the meantime, there is more bombing, more destruction, more hardship and more victims. We know that the roads all over the country are full of refugees, on foot, on horse drawn wagons, in cars, on anything that can move. People are deadly terrified of the Nazis and they ran for their life to the East of Poland to be as far from the Germans as possible. And we hope, that somewhere among the millions of frightened, tired, poor, bewildered people, may be Mother and Lutek, separate or together.

6 September 1939 and next few days.

As I said before I do not remember dates or names. My memory is full of gaps, some happenings I remember slightly only but there are events deeply engraved in my mind. One of them is my Father's illness. For many years Father complained of heart condition but only periodically he needed some treatment, otherwise he was reasonably well. Sadly, last few weeks appeared very hard for him, though initially, I could hardly notice anything wrong. Worrying thoughts of the family, of the home in Sosnowiec, of his health, of the big unknown "tomorrow" resulted, in what must have been a heart attack.

One day, on my return home I found him in the bed looking very ill. My aunt, usually calm and sensible, this time was desperate and helpless. Telephones cut off, no taxis available, no ambulances, no emergency departments and, those still undamaged hospitals, overflowing with wounded, with not enough doctors and nurses, not to mention shortage of even simple medicine.

I was then nearly 17 years old but I was completely lacking any self-reliance. I was like a child who always needed to be held by the hand and told what to do. In the present situation I stood motionless looking at my aunt, asking her with my eyes only, without saying a word. I had no initiative of my own at all, I did not know where to go for help, what kind of help... I was stunned!

In the meantime, there is an air raid alarm, and the common sense dictates us to hurry to the air shelter in the cellar. But how? Father must not be moved. Can we leave him on the third floor alone? So, we stay on the third floor with him. Soon we hear distinctive dull drone of bombers, louder and louder, then fast-growing noise, whizz, swish and deafening explosions close to us, the whole building is trembling and... after a moment you realise that it must have been somewhere else, and you are still alive... This was repeated few more times, luckily not with such intensity, much further away from us.

And... in the middle of it all, Father gravely ill in bed, desperately needing at least peace and quiet... I and my aunt and my Father looking at each other, with visible fear in their eyes and not knowing what to do!

Soon Edzia managed to regain her composure, went out and after a while succeeded in bringing a doctor. She found him almost accidentally. He was a young medic, a refugee himself, who was caught up in Warsaw and stayed with his relatives, my aunt's neighbours. Although he was very sympathetic, that was not enough to help my Father. Just an empty syringe, a stethoscope and aspirin tablets, could not help a lot. He left a prescription, recommended the impossible: complete rest in tranquil silence! Also, he promised to come back soon again.

Unfortunately, I cannot recollect the exact order of events, but I do remember, that aunt gave me an address of prof. Semmerau-Siemiradski, a cardiologist, whom Father visited occasionally as a patient. Knowing the

town quite well I walked quite a distance in the direction of his street. Warsaw looked so different from how it was only a week ago!

Lots of damaged buildings, some in ruins, some burned down, everywhere plenty of debris, roads with craters caused by exploding bombs, tram rails torn, twisted and lifted high from the surface. But there were also some quarters of the town, which despite the frequent airstrikes were almost intact, or very little damaged. Unfortunately, the posh quarter where I expected to find prof. Semmerau's villa, was in ruins and still smouldering.

Around this time, Warsaw's mayor, president Starzynski, appealed to all young and able men to leave the town and proceed eastwards. The idea was to reinforce the Polish Army with young recruits and possibly also to spare Warsaw from further bombardments, as a town of no military significance. Many people left the town that evening.

I have no recollection how the next few days have passed by. Most probably every day was similar to the previous one: Father ill, from time to time air raids, nervousness, tension and daily problems with food, etc.

I cannot remember whether my Father was fully conscious all the time, whether he suffered badly, whether he had any medication, (in the end I sincerely hope that he must have had some) whether I was comforting him enough? There are so many questions unanswered...

The lack of my memory of the last days of Father's illness and of the final moments of his life, disturbs my conscience even now, making me feel somehow guilty for not being close enough to him, in time when he so badly needed warmth and moral support.

Also, I do not remember many other basic things e.g. when were the gas and electricity cut off, what did we eat, did Edzia cook? If so on what kind of stove? Complete blank! I do remember that Edzia filled the bathtub with water before the taps had run dry and that, with foresight, she stocked some essentials: candles, flour, salt, sugar, some bread. She took the whole burden on her shoulders - looking after her gravely ill brother-in-law and me, her nephew.

And now it is too late to talk about it, anyway there is no one to talk to. I am the only one who outlived all other members of my Family. Although, after

the war I lived together with Edzia in the same flat in Bytom till she died there in 1952, regretfully very rarely have we spoken about the old days. She was then a full-time teacher in a local college, returning home very tired in the evening, and I was young, busy working, enjoying free time, trying to make up the lost years. Although she most probably would have been very keen to talk about the past (as I am now) but I rather did not want to go back, I much preferred not to think of "yesterday". I was preoccupied with my friends, living unconcerned just from day to day, a kind of happy-go-lucky life. Still, that is how it was then. Now it is much too late to try to fill the gaps.

The lack of running water, proper food, permanent blackouts, being confined to the flat and deprived of all communications, also the frequent air attacks and constant fear of being bombed meant that the living conditions were becoming worse every day. No need to add that there was seriously ill Father, whose state of health deteriorated rapidly. There was no help available, not only to save his life but even to alleviate his suffering. Helplessly we watched him fade away.

The news from the front was not good. The Germans were inflicting heavy loses and in most cases their tanks were breaking resistance of heroic but badly equipped and unprepared Polish Army. They were getting closer and closer to Warsaw every day, and finally one day they closed the ring around the town and the siege of Warsaw begun!

Now the German artillery relentlessly and systematically started pounding the town with heavy gunfire from close distance. From time to time the continuous shelling was doubled by air bombardments. Burning buildings were seen now everywhere. It was frightful!

One afternoon a shrapnel hit our building one floor above us. There was rapidly growing whiz and immediately a deafening explosion shook the walls. Dense dust filled the room, you could hear a sound of shattered glass and falling debris. After a while, when the dust settled down, we could hardly believe that no one of us was hurt and the only damage done were broken windows and pieces of plaster fallen of the ceiling. Seconds later another shrapnel exploded in the vicinity, happily somewhere further from us...

I was frightened to death, but if I was shaking, what about my Father, whose bed was covered with dust? How much longer could his heart withstand all this?

Soon the floors were swept, dust cleaned and a spare set of widows, normally being put up for the winter only, were hang instead of the broken ones. The life returned to the usual daily routine to which we slowly became accustomed.

On the 17th of September the Russian troops crossed the border and invaded Eastern part of Poland. A move no one could predict. They did it without declaring war and even without any earlier signs of hostilities usually preceding such an action. It is difficult to tell now if we in Warsaw learned about it immediately after it happened or sometime later. However, all those who were then in the part of Poland not yet captured by the Germans, were witnessing the invasion of the Red Army. The Germans advancing East and the Russians moving West. They met on the river Bug as two friendly forces and completed the invasion. For the defeated and fragmented Polish Army at least, the fighting has ended but not the war. Some Polish soldiers and officers left their ranks and tried to get back home, some succeeded, some were less lucky and were taken prisoners - by either the Germans or the Russians - depending on which side of the demarcation line they were captured. For us in Warsaw, the fact of Russian invasion did not change anything in practice, the shelling and the air-bombing continued. Yet for those still hoping that the Polish Army, after regrouping, miraculously will be able to repulse the Germans, it was a definite blow!

Father's health was deteriorating despite all possible help Edzia could provide. Food and water were very scarce. Another week or more passed by and one morning... suddenly we realised that it was unusually quiet, no shell explosions, strangely still, so different to the last three weeks!

Warsaw's garrison surrendered! Well, there were various reactions among ordinary people, some were glad that there was no more danger of being bombed or maimed by shrapnel, others were completely broken by the dreadful victory of the Germans, but definitely all were extremely tired and in great need of a bit of normality. Being curious, I went out the next day just to see, what the other parts of the town looked like after the long

bombardment. Only few streets were completely impassable, some only slightly damaged, many were almost intact, among others the main artery Marszałkowska Street. There, I saw some Germans in military uniforms, driving fast in their vehicles, almost as confidently as in a place well known to them! It struck me that they knew Warsaw so well.

Father died a few days later 10 October 1939. I remember only the deep sadness of both of us, me and Edzia, but I imagine that for Edzia this also was a kind of relief. The last four weeks were difficult for everybody but for her, having no one to share the burden with, it was an extremely exhausting time. I was not of much assistance to her unfortunately.

The offices issuing death certificates and other documents were still not working and yet, despite everything, in such unusual circumstances, she managed to arrange in a very short time the complicated formalities enabling a proper burial. The next day funeral was very simple, only a few of Edzia's friends attending the sad ceremony. We buried Father in the Jewish Cemetery in Okopowa Street.

Edzia's home became suddenly so empty, so still...no more shelling, no air raids, no ill Father in his bed... Immediately Edzia started making enquiries about possibilities of travel to Radom. There was no public transport available, no Polish administration yet established and the German "victorious" soldiers, whom everybody was terrified of encountering were everywhere. How Edzia did it, I have no idea, but she found a Jewish driver with a cart and a pair of horses, who was willing to risk and try to go to Radom. He was looking for a few more people to fill his wagon to make his trip profitable. After another day or two he was ready and off we went. It was not a stagecoach, just a primitive wagon normally used to carry not too large loads of various goods, with several planks arranged as seats and covered with a ragged tarpaulin on arched supports. There were about a dozen of us, all frightened people inside, all sitting very tense and very quietly, fearing of being stopped and questioned by the Germans with all possible consequences. The traffic on the highway consisted almost exclusively of specially designed military vehicles, all kinds of open cars, transporters, tracks, large and small, single motorcycles and with side cars, vehicles on wheels, on caterpillars, mixed, big, small, some with machine guns or other armaments, with special fixtures, with individual markings,

with brackets, straps, etc. I imagine that every detail must have had its unique purpose. Despite my hatred of the Germans, I was fascinated with the perfection of their equipment. I have never seen anything like this in Polish Army! What an unequally mighty enemy!

Despite that the distance to Radom was only about 60km, because of the imposed curfew the journey was planned for two days. We stopped halfway in Białobrzeg in the market square. This was the central square in the village, with the town hall in the middle and lined with trees and on market days peasants came and traded their livestock, grain, fruits etc. there. That evening it was empty and therefore convenient for us to rest there till the dawn. We were prepared to spend the night sitting uncomfortably inside the wagon under the cover of the tarpaulin. There was no hotel and even if there was one, we preferred not to be seen by anybody in case they started asking questions.

An hour or so later a large, motorised column of German troops arrived and parked their vehicles beside our cart. Within seconds some of the soldiers, probably attracted by the strange look of our cart, curiously started peeping inside. Every time we had to explain to them who we are and why we were here. One of them, an officer, insisted for us to go to their local headquarters, to be properly accommodated for the night by the military. Edzia, fluent in German, tried to convince him that we feel quite comfortable and that we are used to this kind of travel and therefore we do not need any lodging. He categorically demanded and we, Edzia and I, had to oblige and follow him. We thought that this will be the end of our journey. We were scared to death!

Once inside, he explained something to his fellow officer and one orderly took us to a nearby house. It was a small, old wooden house, crooked from its age, which sank quite deep below the pavement. Through the wooden shatters we could see some light inside. Few stone steps down and we entered a primitive cobbler's workshop. And there, on the low, rickety stools, around the cobbler's work bench full of tools, pins, leather cuttings, lit by a paraffin lamp, were sitting two German soldiers having a friendly chat with a young Jew, dressed traditionally and with his skull cap on... We were shocked. Initially unable to comprehend the situation, but after a moment we were very, very relieved. He showed us to the other room

which was the family living accommodation. There was an elderly Jew and his wife. Again, it was Edzia, who in Yiddish explained everything. Anyway, they welcomed us and accommodated us in a comfortable bed.

Next day we arrived in Radom. We rushed straight to Kilinskiego 8, to my Grandfather's home, where we expected to find my Mother. Mania opened the door and seeing us stood speechless for a moment, then confused, then shocked with surprise, and only then... emotional tears, and more tears started flowing. Only after quite a while we all started talking! We about Warsaw, about Father's death, Mania about them in Radom...

Because the Nazis started to harass Jews, Grandfather, for his safety moved to stay with Mania's husband, further away from the centre of town. The Nazis were in Radom for more than a month and already there were several victims of their persecution. Jews in Radom feared for their lives!

My Mother...she was not in Radom. She and her younger brother Abram joined the main stream of people fleeing from the Germans and, unfortunately, their whereabouts were unknown to Mania. As far as Mania knew, Mother's idea was to join us in Warsaw because she strongly suspected that Father and I were with Edzia. But what really happened to them Mania did not know!

Three days later...in the early hours, there was an impatient sharp knocking on the door and... there was my Mother! She looked bewildered. She burst inside and seeing me, searched for Father almost shouting: Where is Max? Where is he?

It was a very difficult and nerve-racking hour for everybody, only after we all calmed down, we started telling the whole, very tragic and sad story.

I do not think, that in August 1939 a reasonable person could believe that in the case of a war with Germany, Poland could win it standing alone. But I am also sure that no one thought that the war could take such an unexpectedly unfavourable turn.

Within only a few days, the German Army over-run most of the Country. The Polish army was in disarray, fragmented, without command and apart from small, individual pockets of resistance unable to fight. The Germans applied tactics unknown before; they used their powerful tank divisions to

conduct massive, concentrated attacks on a narrow sector of front, which in practice was never really established; they were breaking it and moving forward with their tanks, regardless of the positions of other units.

If successful, as they usually were, they encircled small pockets of Polish troops, causing havoc among other units not expecting an enemy from their flanks, charging at them from behind; they misled Polish command regarding their positions and caused a real panic among completely disorientated civil population.

When in the last days of August 1939 my Mother went to Radom, where her Father and sister lived, the idea was, that in the case of a war, she will wait there for some time, to see how the situation develops. Radom was much further from the German border than Sosnowiec and therefore considered a much safer place. Unfortunately, that was not so.

Within only a few days since the start of the war all roads leading to the East of Poland became one-way, continuous stream of refugees. Initially, they were from the towns close to the border, but gradually, as the Germans pushed forward, more people were leaving their homes, joining the rush to escape from the dreaded Nazis.

Those escaping were Government officials, politicians, judges, policemen, journalists, academics, and many others. Many with their families, all fearing reprisals from the Germans for their previous activities and, understandably, there were Jews, regardless of their profession, age or sex. For well-known reasons they were running for their lives.

The stream of refugees grew steadily, like a river with its tributaries.

As a source of transportation people used whatever was available to them. Trains and other public transport already stopped running some days before. Not too many had their own cars, few dignitaries had official limousines, but the large majority used anything on wheels they owned, or could buy, borrow or hire. Thousands just walked, carrying their bundles, sometimes pushing a pram with a child in it or even some possessions.

People from Radom joined this mass exodus three or four days later, and among them also my Mother and her younger brother Abram. They too became part of a tens of thousands of desperate and terrified refugees,

whose only aim was not to get caught by the Germans. My Mother also hoped that she may find her way to Warsaw, to be reunited with us.

The weather in September was hot and sunny, not good for long and tiring marching. People were exhausted, thirsty, with blisters on their feet, nervous, the children were crying, but in everybody's mind was one thing only: to keep walking, as far and as fast as was possible. All this created an atmosphere of unbearable tension! Many could not cope any longer and separated from their loved ones, losing them in such a large crowd, often for long periods. The ditches and the fringes of the roads were full of scattered luggage, suitcases, bundles and single items thrown away, only because they became too heavy to carry. Here and there was an abandoned car, broken down or without petrol, sometime a cart with a broken wheel, often with somebody's possessions left on it, impossible to carry.

Multiplying this enormous tragedy were German fighter planes. They appeared suddenly. Flying low and undisturbed, the pilots were shooting their machine guns at those on the roads, including horses. People learned to run for cover as soon they could hear an approaching aeroplane and tried to hide under the trees or in potato fields. Despite this, there were victims, wounded and dead... Dead horses were here and there in the ditches.

But the miserable columns of desperate folk continued marching, as long as their strength allowed. Sometimes whole platoons of Polish soldiers tried to make their way against the stream, in opposite direction. Often, they were those, who lost their bearings, got lost and were looking disorientated for their regiment. Also, quite frequently there were detachments retreating in panic, surprised seeing German tanks well ahead trying to surround the area! All this caused enormous confusion also among refugees. Many, who only a few minutes ago were desperate to flee, now resigned and were giving up, others hoped to get through, despite the danger.

I have no knowledge, how many days Mother was on her way, partly walking, partly being driven in a hired horse-cart. On her first day after leaving Radom, she came across an Army post and noticed an officer speaking on the phone. She approached him and asked if she could make an urgent phone call. He refused, explaining that the line was for the official use only. Mother persisted and lied to him, that she is in charge of a party

of worker evacuees, and as being responsible for them, must get in touch with her Head Office in Warsaw. In the end she managed to convince him, and he connected her with the given number. That was... Father's Warsaw office. They told her there, that "Mr. Gelibter with his son just left, 5 minutes earlier"... and the connection was cut off. (And we really were in that office about that time. Had we stayed a little bit longer there, who knows how much easier it could have been for my Parents!)

As the roads leading to Warsaw were blocked by the Army, Mother continued her trek to Lublin. There, in Lublin, she knew a friendly family, where she and Abram could stop for a while and recuperate from the tiring journey. She hoped that from there it will be possible to ring or even travel to Warsaw. What she did not know was that the Germans advanced fast and were near Warsaw already.

While Mother was looking for her friends in Lublin, the sirens announced an air raid. Everybody rushed to the nearest air shelter and so did Mother. Inside, she saw... Lutek!

He too just came to Lublin, fleeing from Sosnowiec, and he too was going to the very same people, hoping to get some news! One can only imagine the joy and the excitement!

In Lublin, they learned that apart from Gdansk and Warsaw, everywhere else the fighting almost stopped. Only the two garrisons were still holding, and Warsaw was now under siege! However, they did not know, whether Father and I were in Warsaw, or left with others.

Two days later, Mother with Lutek and Abram were on the run again...

The stream of refugees this time was much less dense. Some already have reached their destination, others dispersed in various direction, besides, in that part of Poland the danger of invasion was not considered as threatening as it was in the West of the Country and life there was more normal. Even some rudimentary public transport was in service.

Finally, they arrived in Lwów and decided to take a break from their wandering.

Lwów 1939

Lwów was one of the largest Polish towns; a cultural centre with well-known Universities, and as such, was chosen by many refugees as a good place to settle – at least for a while. Mother immediately begun her search for Father and me. Among many people, she met Father's boss, who confirmed seeing us in Warsaw, on the day before he left for Lwów.

The siege of Warsaw continued, and the Garrison of Gdansk was holding its positions, but apart from this, Polish Army as a military force did not exist anymore. In places there were some regiments, or smaller units, very much depleted and left without command, who mostly fled to Romania, as did many of the Government ministers. They were not able to fight effectively. Ever more soldiers, seeing, that they were abandoned by their commanding officers, also fled in uniforms or without. The possibility that within the next few days the whole Country will be overrun by the Germans became menacingly very real. Even in Lwów it became a serious cause for reflection now!

And then, suddenly, on 17 of September, the Soviet Union invaded Poland and the Red Army, not encountering any resistance, started a fast advance deep into Poland's interior. As we learned later, this step followed prior agreement signed between Hitler and Stalin.

The line, where the two armies, Russian and German, met became the formal border, dividing Poland into two parts. From that moment, to cross from one part to the other, special documents were needed. The war, in this part of the Europe, for the time being, was over! Lwów was now in the Russian part of Poland and there, separated by the frontier from Warsaw, or Radom or Sosnowiec, were Mother and Lutek.

They rented a room and gradually started to settle down. Soon they discovered that Mother's other brother, uncle Samek, the doctor from Węgrów, who also left his home and fled to the east, was now in Łuck, not far from Lwów and was already practising as a doctor there. They got in touch and Abram moved to Łuck.

My Mother, getting more and more anxious about Father and me, could not wait to go back to Radom. In the meantime, the siege of Warsaw ended, and

the total capitulation was signed. A week or so later, she went to Przemyśl, where the river San was marking the border. To cross the bridge a special pass was needed, obtainable only from the military. I doubt if she had enough patience to apply for this pass. I rather believe, in what she told me much later, that when they required a pass from her at the frontier, she pretended to be a railwayman's wife, who in the turmoil of the war got separated from her husband. He kept all her documents; she was not aware of the needed border pass, and the only thing she wanted now was to go home to her children. Her explanation, voice and facial expression, (which was natural then, I presume) were so convincing that in the muddle of the traffic, they let her pass without any papers.

And that is how she came to Radom. When she knocked at the door, she was in an uncontrollable state of mind and extremely tired.

We were all in my Grandfather flat at 8 Kilińskiego Street, sitting around the table and talking, each one telling their own story. There were also moments of complete silence, there were tears and questions. Mother just could not stop asking about Father's illness. Then she told us her story, what happened to her after she left Radom, how she met Lutek, of meeting Samek, about Russians in Lwów and Lutek's peculiar job in a tram-depot.

Then Mania, told of their life in Radom under the Germans. It was not more than a month of their dreaded reign of harassment especially aimed at the Jews, and already there were first victims. This did not herald good expectations...Mania with her husband lived in a quieter quarter of the town, and as a precaution, she persuaded her Father - my Grandad - to move in with them.

Then, arose the question of our future and all discussion concentrated on me, as the most vulnerable. Mother insisted that I should flee from the Germans, go to Lwów with her and be there together with Lutek. She was sure, that there I will be able to continue my education and reunite with some of my old friends from Sosnowiec. She realised that the comfort of living in a rented room in Lwów will not be the same as that of a spacious apartment in Sosnowiec, but she believed that living free of fear from the Nazis would more than compensate for this. She was prepared that it will

not be an easy life, but she saw this as the only way of escaping the unknown fate awaiting the Jews "here" - and we all agreed with her.

To me, although now it is very difficult to remember, the whole war was primarily a tremendously exciting curiosity, an adventure combined with some danger but never life threatening. The decision to escape to the Russian side of Poland only changed the location of the adventure. In my childish mind I already started imagining pictures of me furtively crossing the border, of creeping up in darkness to avoid the guards, of being in Lwów and seeing the real Russians.

Two or so days later, Mother and I said "good-bye" to everybody and went back to Warsaw with Edzia. There, Edzia with the help of a distant cousin planned the details of our voyage. The cousin agreed to accompany us to the frontier and arrange the smugglers to take us across the river.

From Warsaw we went by train to Siedlce and from there we had to hire further transport from the local peasants which should be no problem. It was the end of October and quite cold. We were in a horse drawn cart, on a dirt track in the countryside where we did not expect to meet any soldiers. Against our expectations however, a German military patrol suddenly stopped us and started questioning us. Suspecting that we were Jews, they wanted to take us to their command post. Only a cold-blooded bluff of our cousin, who in quite humorous way offered to prove, but not in front of the ladies, that he and I were not Jews, made them smile and let us go. We were enormously lucky not to be exposed (!) and to be allowed to continue our journey.

Sometime later in a village where we met our contact, we parted with Edzia and our cousin. The man showed us to a derelict, deserted house on the outskirts of a village. Inside in the half-dark room we were met by some suspiciously looking characters. They told us to wait in complete silence till someone comes for us - when the time is right... and they locked us up and disappeared. We waited and waited...

In the meantime, it became completely dark. No lamp, no matches, not even stars in the sky! All sorts of thoughts started disturbing us then: who are these people, can they be trusted, will they perhaps rob us of everything and leave us here, will they denounce us to the Germans?

It was quite some time later, at night, when they came back. They marched us in darkness, through fields, until we reached the banks of the river Bug, one of the largest rivers in Poland and in this place really wide. A primitive, narrow and shallow boat was waiting. In complete silence we sat in the wobbly boat. Apart from us there were two oarsmen. We clenched tightly to the wooden seats as the waves splashed against the boat. Soon some water started seeping into the boat and this terrified us. In complete darkness of a cloudy night, somewhere half way across the river, which seemed wide as an ocean; alone with these strange and suspiciously looking characters in a leaking dinghy, dressed in heavy winter coats, unable to swim, eligible to be shot at by the soldiers on either side of the river as a spies, we were only counting for a miracle to reach the other bank alive.

In the end, what seemed to us as endless hours, we landed among reeds on the Russian side. The smugglers, in whisper warned us to not betray our presence and showed us a distant light indicating the direction in which to run. There should be a house in which we could rest safely. So, we tried to do, unfortunately only after a few steps, we were abruptly stopped by a Soviet frontier patrol, who with guns aimed at us, jumped suddenly in front of us from nowhere, shouting in Russian: Hands up! Lay down!

After a superficial search and our explanation that we are just ordinary people trying to escape from the Germans, although they did not arrest us, nevertheless they marched us back to an official river crossing point! There they put us on a river barge and handed us over... to the Germans. This time the Germans treated us leniently, taking us as one of the many Polish families returning home and without any further investigation let us go.

It was already mid-morning, and since yesterday afternoon we were without any food. Luckily, we did remember the name of the village, where we crossed the river first time, and so we walked several kilometres to get there. We also succeeded in finding our ferryman, who turned out to be an honest man; he gave us food and drink and in the cover of the next night repeated the same trip with us. This time successfully!

We came to a house absolutely exhausted, physically and mentally. We were glad for some tea given to us there and an offer to rest for a few hours.

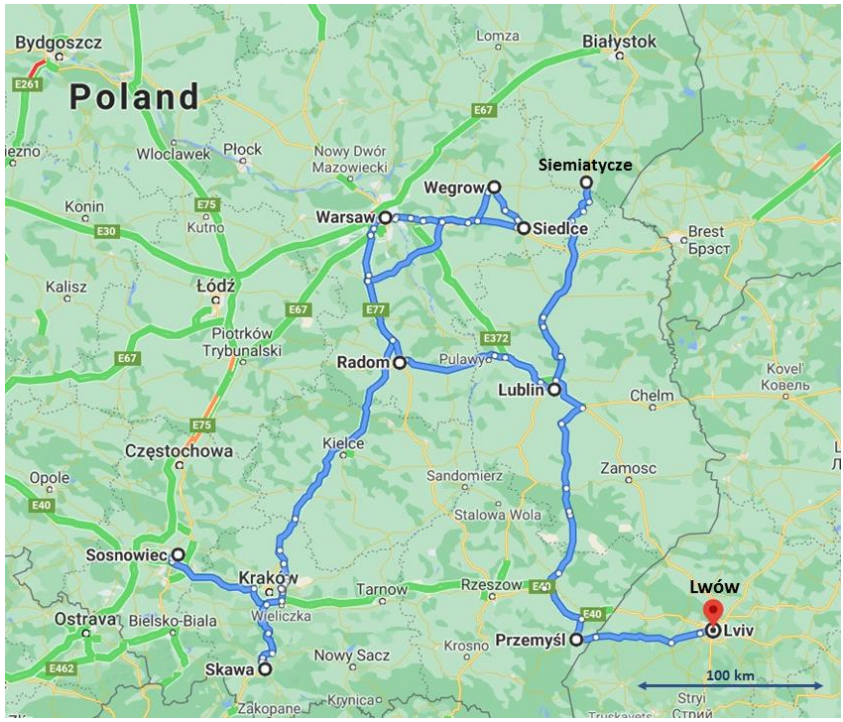
But first, Mother sent a messenger to the nearby village Drohiczyn, where we knew that Samek was waiting for us.

At dawn Samek arrived in a hired horse drawn cab. After a very moving moments he took us to the nearest railway station, about 10 km away, Siemiatycze, where we all boarded a train to Lwów. On the way there, four mounted Russian soldiers stopped us at a roadside checkpoint. It was a bitterly cold and windy early morning. They were on small hairy horses covered with frost. The harnesses were made of a rope. The soldiers were wearing peeked caps with long ear flaps, very long dark grey tattered coats, frayed at the bottom and instead of proper army rucksacks on their backs they had cloth sacks tighten with an ordinary string. Their old, long guns with bayonets on them were also fixed with string instead of leather straps.... I just could not believe the enormous difference of equipment of the German Army!

And so, my first encounter with the Red Army was rather a shocking disappointment to me! Anyway, they asked us to show our passes and when Samek produced his, which was in fact an out of date note certifying that he was a doctor, they accepted it and let us proceed. I am convinced that they did not even attempt to read it. I noticed that they looked at it upside down. As it appeared to me later, in many cases a piece of a paper with a rubber stamp on it could substitute for many documents.

For the first time since the end of the siege of Warsaw, I was not afraid of being stopped by the Germans and felt safe and relaxed. After several hours on a train we were reunited with Lutek and Abram.

A new chapter of my experiences started.



In Lwów we stayed in a single rented room in large flat. We shared the kitchen and the bathroom with the owner, Dr. Petersil, a retired judge.

As soon as I settled down and all the daily functions became a routine, my initial curiosity of the war, which till now I treated as a big adventure, quickly started to fade away. Gradually the life of a war refugee became a hard reality. Winter with all its unpleasantness came quite early. Inadequate clothing, cold weather, lack of proper heating at home, difficulties in obtaining and buying food, all this added to psychological problems which till now were suppressed by a kind of a long-lasting shock. Eventually I started to feel the death of my Father more and more clearly. All other events, which till not so long ago I considered only as a short-term hardship, now appeared to be rather a more permanent change. I lost contacts with my friends, I missed my school and worst, I became separated from my sweetheart Iza - my first innocent adolescent love.

Within only two months my life transformed enormously, anyway I presume that the same happened, if not even more, to the rest of us, my Mother and Lutek included.

When Mother returned to Lwów with me, Lutek was already working in a tramway-depot as a ...welder! I remember shearing a narrow metal bed with him, which was very uncomfortable for both of us, especially for Lutek however, as he was suffering with huge abscesses under his armpit. He had to get up at 4.30 in the morning to be at work at 6 am. The work was hard, even for accustomed manual workers, and for him especially as every movement of his arm caused pain. He was welding under-carriages in a draughty open shed. We were sorry for him knowing that he must be suffering considerable discomfort.

I must explain how Lutek, a Warsaw University graduate with a master's degree in law and an apprentice in the legal profession became a welder. Well, about two years earlier, in 1937, he and some of his close friends foresaw a not too rosy vision for the future. They feared effects of a global recession and a great rise in unemployment, particularly among the intellectuals. Consequently, to prepare themselves for such circumstances they decided to learn an additional and practical craft. Lutek chose welding courses, not knowing then that two years later, though for completely different reasons, his "skill" will be more useful than his University degree.

In Lwów in September 1939, already under the Russians, Lutek with a status of a refugee had no chances to find a job as a lawyer, but as a welder he was employed immediately and with better wages. So, he became the first Law M.A. welder. Several months passed till he found a more suitable job.

In the meantime, I was admitted to high school to continue my interrupted education, though a month or two later I changed it for an art school. There, quite unexpectedly I met Iza's younger brother! I was delighted, hoping that Iza would also be in Lwów. Unfortunately, it appeared, that Iza and her mother stayed in Sosnowiec and only Tadek with his father had fled to Lwów. Thanks to Tadek, however, I met some more of my old friends. From that moment I had some company that I was so longing for. I could go out now, not always on my own. I did not feel as alone anymore, as before.

But...then other problems arose for me. First, of a moral or ethical nature: it was only two months since my Father died and I was still in mourning - was it then appropriate to go with them to the cinema or to a café? Was it right just to enjoy myself? Anyway, I did go, though I did not tell Mother.

The second problem was a more mondain one: money. My "rediscovered" friends were not as restricted with their spending as I was. Their pocket money exceeded my "budget" many-fold. They were all well dressed, while I was wearing a cheap, too small second-hand overcoat and an old-fashioned suit. These disparities did not help my self-esteem, which was already low enough.

In the first few months following the outbreak of war, Lwów did not change much. Although the Germans bombed the town, destroying a few buildings, the living conditions for the local inhabitants, apart from some worsening supply of food and other goods, remained almost unaltered. They continued to live in their own homes, their personal possessions haven't been touched, the wardrobes were full of their own clothes, most of those, who had servants before still managed to keep them now. They were still going to their clubs, playing bridge, meeting in restaurants. The cinemas, theatres, concert halls were functioning as normal. Local children were continuing lessons in their old schools.

Whereas many thousands of refugees - we among them- who as a result of desperate mass exodus, involuntarily found themselves in Lwów, or other towns in that part of Poland, were deprived of all this normality. We stayed in rented rooms, all what we possessed could easily be contained in one or two suitcases; we have been plucked out from our environment - no matter how bad or how good it was, but only when we lost it, we could appreciate its stability. Our normal lives were smashed to pieces, our families were separated, our social live was non-existent. The contrast, in what can be generally described as the quality of life was enormous, at least in the beginning. Gradually the Lwowians also started to feel the hardship of the war under the Russian occupation.

In the meantime, the refugees were struggling to decide whether to stay, far away in not so friendly to them new environment or to go back to their own homes, with their families though, as Jews, they would face unknown fate from the hands of the Germans. They were even encouraged to return home by their families left behind. Many of them, preferring comfort over safety, applied for the passes enabling them to return to the German occupied zone. Tadek with his father, and a few other people I knew, returned - they all

subsequently perished in the Holocaust. But for those, who did not go back, the future was also full of surprises.

From the first days in Lwów, we have been trying to get in touch with Edzia and Mania. Though Russia and Germany were allies in those days, it was not possible to (officially) send letters by the Post Office to the part of Poland occupied by the Germans, or as we called, to "the other side". However, Lutek obtained an address of a woman, who was smuggling letters and some parcels to and from, and through her we renewed contacts with our aunts. Once or twice, apart from letters, we even received from them some badly needed winter clothing.

One evening Lutek did not come home after work. As it never happened before, and it was unusual for him not to tell us that he may be late for supper, we became worried for him. In the morning, Mother and I started looking for him. At his work, they told us, that the previous day he left at normal time. We went to the Militia, to report him missing and to find out if for some unknown to us reason, he perhaps had been arrested. The uniformed NKVD, or Militiamen ignored our enquiry completely and were rather laughing at us, suggesting that most probably, he met a woman, got drunk and will come back as he sobers up. We knew that it was just impossible, not Lutek's style!

Not giving up, we contacted his friends and one of them, who spoke to Lutek the day before, remembered Lutek mentioning, that he must go to find out if any letters arrived from Warsaw. Immediately Mother somehow associated Lutek's disappearance with the woman-smuggler. She decided to check if Lutek had been there. I waited outside the building, where the woman lived, and Mother went to the second floor flat. After a while looking very nervous, she came out of the entrance door, rushing past me and managed only to tell me: go! I followed her and once we were some distance from that building, she told me, what happened.

When she rang the doorbell, a suspiciously looking man opened the door and without any questions invited her in. Mother noticed more men inside. Instantly she suspected some kind of a trap and quite soberly said: "sorry, my mistake, I am on the wrong floor" and without hesitation went one floor up, waited there for a few minutes and then rushed down the stairs.

Mother knew a daughter of an old friend who lived in Lwów and was married to an influential local doctor's son. Mother contacted her and told her everything about Lutek's disappearance and the suspected ambush, asking if she, through her father-in-law, could help and locate Lutek's whereabouts. The next day, when they met again, Mother found her very distressed. It appeared, that her husband trying to help and hoping to find out if Lutek was there, went to the woman's house and got arrested! So, now we had little doubt that the same happened to Lutek three days before. Mother, if not for her fast and cold-blooded reaction, could easily have shared the same fate. As we found out later, the NKVD caught the woman red-handed. Whether she really was engaged in espionage, as they suspected, we do not know, but in order to arrest as many people involved, as possible, they organised a trap in her flat.

So, our next step was to locate the place, where Lutek was kept. NKVD was commonly known for its secret methods. Arrests, deportations, disappearance of some people – regardless of guilt or not- were occurring every day. People were afraid to talk about these matters. So, whomever Mother asked for advice, they helplessly shrugged their shoulders. In the end, she got an idea to prepare a food parcel and try to deliver it to a jail. If accepted, it would mean that he was there!

Next morning and for a few consecutive mornings we tried to deliver a parcel in several of Lwów's prisons. Each time it was not accepted. We gave up. Our consolation was our absolute conviction, that Lutek was not involved in any spying. We knew it, but was it enough for the dreaded NKVD? We knew that they could send innocent people to labour camps if they wanted. Would Lutek be among them? Nothing we could do for him; we just had to wait and see.

And indeed! Three weeks later Lutek came back home! Pale, exhausted but in one piece and healthy! Yes, he was caught in this trap, but above all, he was very, very lucky to be freed after such a short time. He never spoke of his interrogation. Where was he kept? Not in prison, he never left the NKVD HQ building! He was there, when we enquired. A few hours later, the doctor's son was also released.

Deportation

The rumours circulated that the Russians also started deporting refugees, majority of whom were Jews. It was no secret that a few months earlier, they were rounding up many Polish officers and other prominent Poles, who they suspected of hostile activities and deporting them to... one could easily guess where. But Jews? Jews, who in the eyes of many Poles, true or false, were generally recognised as sympathisers of the Soviet Union?

People were puzzled, who and why the Russians selected to be taken away. Many tried to guess if they also were destined for the "resettlement". The deportations were always occurring at night and almost at random. No pattern was evident.

Lutek, who already worked in an office and suspecting that he may also be selected, in order to avoid expulsion, decided to stay away from home for a time being, until the Russians stopped the action. After about two weeks, when he thought that it was safe to return home, one night we were awoken by a strange commotion on the street. A military van stopped in front of our house, several Russian soldiers jumped out and rushed inside the house. A loud knocking at the door of our flat, the same knocking one floor above and after checking our documents, Mother and Lutek were told to pack up their essential belongings. I as a student was ordered to stay put! Ironically, now we begged the Russians to deport me also! They "kindly" agreed but only after long persuasion. Half an hour later we were inside a van. There already was a family, also refugees, who stayed in a rented room above us. Mrs. Zofia Brodowska with her daughter Wanda (17), son Zygmunt (10) and her old mother - they were from Warsaw. Her husband's whereabouts were unknown to them then. He was an aeroplane designer and an officer serving in the Polish Air Force. Since that night, our two families shared the common fate in various locations for many years. A few minutes later yet another group of people joined us and the van pulled away.

The next stage of our forced peregrination begun in the early hours of 20-th of June 1940 from Persenkowka, one of Lwów's railway stations. Five and a half years later, in February 1946, I was passing through that station again. This time in the opposite direction, returning to... my non-existent home. What happened in the meantime comes next.

The Forest

It was daylight already when we arrived at Persenkowka, one of Lwów's railway stations. The van stopped at the goods ramp and the soldiers, or whoever they were; militia, NKVD (KGB)? - I presume the latter - ordered us to alight. There already were more people with suitcases and bundles. On the siding stood an empty cattle train. In each of the wagons the sliding door was wide open. The train was waiting for us...

After a while the NKVD ordered us into the wagons. Inside at each end were two levels of rough bunks rigged up from coarse planks. The upper bunk had an advantage because on both sides were slits like louver windows, through which some fresh air and a little daylight could pass in. The bottom bunk was like a deep dark cave.

The door on the other side was not fully shut. A gap of about 8 inches was left, into which was fixed a large diameter pipe, sticking out of the wagon and making a kind of a chute. One could easily imagine the purpose of it. The gap above the pipe was boarded with a plank. We did not have to wait for too long till someone, was forced by nature to use it...

Year later, after the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, almost exactly the same trains, in hundreds, were commonly used to evacuate millions of Soviet citizens further from the front line to the East of the vast country.

There were about 40 people inside. I presume, this number of people was similar in other carriages. They were men and women, single persons and families with little children, Jews and Christians, young and old, educated and peasants - a cross section of an average society. All were bewildered and shocked! All deeply puzzled why was this happening to them? Everybody was very subdued and quiet. Despite the situation we preserved enough courtesy to offer the better (upper) bunks to older people or to those with little children. There was no pushing, no arguing. We all knew that we would have to share the same fate for quite some time. Because there was not enough room on the bunks for everybody, some had to make their "home" directly on the floor, in the middle of the wagon, even next to the "loo".

The Brodowski family were in the same wagon as us. We “downstairs”, they, because of their old grandmother, “upstairs”. Although in Lwów we lived in the same house for many months we never spoke to each other but now we quickly became acquainted.

As soon as “they”, the Russians, filled the wagon with the allocated number of people, they slid the heavy doors shut behind the last person and bolted it. Immediately, it became dark inside. The noise of locking the door outside and the simultaneous darkness inside, reminded us, that from now on we are imprisoned and destined for deportation.

In Germany it could mean only one thing, but also in Russia it was very worrying...

Gradually our eyes got used to the little light coming through the apertures in the wall. We started talking. People were shocked and could not understand just why they have been picked for deportation. Some, who not so long ago applied to the German Commission in Lwów for repatriation, believed that the Russians are taking us to the border and from there, all will be allowed by the Germans to go back home. But there were also others, we among them, who did not want to go back to the Germans. There were so many theories...One was certainly common to us all; we were all war refugees and probably the Russians did not want us in Lwów. The dispute as to where they are sending us continued. We had no doubts of our destination, we knew the fate of people deported earlier. But there were still those who truly believed that they are going home. They were so sure they wanted to bet that the next station would be Grodek. Well, in the end everything was possible... what, if after all, they are right and the Russians in order to get rid of refugees are sending us back? For us it was the most dreaded thought. Mother and I already have been there, and we knew why we had to flee from there!

The train, or as we called it, the “echelon”, was still stationary. At least a couple of hours passed since they locked us in. Time was doing its job, and in the end, we had no other choice but to accept our new situation. Some people started unpacking whatever food they managed to take, some needed to use the toilet (initially we used blankets to screen the poor soul but later we did not bother), some became tired and laid down, others were

weeping quietly, some children cried, babies needed changing... Life was continuing.

After hours of waiting the wagons jerked and the train's wheels started rolling... All inside the wagon suddenly became deadly quiet. I imagine, that in this moment everybody's minds were occupied with only one thought: where will we end up and will we ever come back from "there"?

As the train rolled on, with our hearts pounding, we waited to read the names of passing stations trying to find out in which direction we are going. Some, familiar with this part of Poland noticed, that we were travelling eastwards, opposite direction to Grodek! A sigh of relief from us. But others found immediate explanation: "it must have been the railway bridge, on the river, (forgot the name) destroyed by bombs and we are taking a detour - you will see, at Złoczów we will turn North, to Rawa Ruska!"

We passed Złoczów and continued further East. Now the chances that we will be handed over to the Germans were nil! Perhaps, for those really hoping to go back home it was a deep disappointment, but for those who feared the Germans much more then Russians, it was a lesser evil and relief. At least one thing was clear now, we are being deported somewhere...to... Siberia?

Quite unexpectedly the train stopped at Tarnopol station. Mother remembered that her friend's sister used to live here. Through the slotted "window" Mother called a young man, who was standing on the platform and offering him some money, asked in return to deliver a note which she hurriedly scribbled. In it she told her what has happened to us and asked to write about us to our uncle Samek in Rowne.

20 - 30 minutes passed and the train was still stationary. Then suddenly, we heard a woman's voice, almost in panic shouting Mother's name and running along the platform. It was Mrs. Gross, who after receiving Mother's letter, in a matter of seconds, instinctively grabbed what she could from her kitchen and running all the way burst in to the station, bringing us some bread and other food. She barely managed to pass this parcel to us, and to exchange a few chaotic words (Mother wept, she wept - well, in such situation there really was not much to talk about) when, after a characteristic jerk, wagon after wagon slowly started moving.

With the eyes full of tears, we shouted "goodbye" to her, she waved back to us, and we were off to the unknown...

It was really a sheer luck that the train did not move just minutes earlier...

A few hours later we crossed the once heavily guarded old Polish Russian frontier, and from now on... we were in the Soviet Union. Soon after we passed the border, our echelon stopped in the middle of nowhere. Around us was nothing but a vast plain. We heard some commotion outside, some shouting in Russian, a noise of unbolting doors one after another and then, our door too had been slid open! We were waiting suspiciously for further action not understanding what is going on. Nevertheless, we were pleased to breathe fresh air. It was still daylight. Then some people cautiously begun jumping outside from the train waiting for the soldiers' reactions but seeing that they allow this, more and more followed including myself.

Within minutes almost all people from the train were outside. Unfortunately, it was too high for the elderly to jump down, so they were unable to stretch their legs, and also to do, what almost without any shame many others did all around. Some, being afraid that the train will suddenly move and leave them behind, did not go far from the track and were squatting just beside their wagons while the braver went further into the steppe.

During this, my first "outing" in these rather very odd circumstances, I bumped into my old friend's sister. I was very glad of that unexpected meeting. I did not know at all that my friend Artek, her brother, is here too, just a few wagons ahead!

The locomotive did not bother to give any warning, and the train started moving again, but just the growing jerk of the carriages was enough to make everybody run back towards their own wagons. The Russian guards stopped locking us in and it was up to us if to have the doors open or shut ...! From then on, as soon the train would come to a halt, whether on a platform of a station or in the middle of nowhere, and even not knowing for how long it would be stationary, people disembarked hurriedly in order to get some fresh water or to look for a toilet, or just to get some fresh air or exercise. This became a routine for the rest of our two weeks long journey.

One day late in the evening the train stopped on a larger station. Our guard let us know that we would get some food here and so from each wagon they needed three men with a blanket and a bucket to bring bread and soup!

There was no problem with blankets, many had one, but buckets? We had to find one, otherwise we would be deprived not only of hot soup but also from a "keepyatok"- steaming hot water - our only hot drink available free at almost every railway station.

I learned then an important lesson, that a spoon and a knife and also a large mug can be lifesaving essentials and as such must always be carried with you.

Our journey, deeper and deeper into the vast land continued uneventfully. During that time our only concerns were will we get some food; will the train stop near a water tap allowing us to wash and will there be toilets. It was more than two weeks that we were squashed in a jerking cattle wagon while the train was monotonously rolling on and stopping only from time to time.

Then one midnight the train stopped, and we were ordered to disembark. But as it soon appeared this was not the end of our journey yet. It was raining and cold. The platform was barely lit. We all waited in tense silence, anxious for the future. The soldiers guarding us, this time did not allow anybody to step aside. Then we were told to move. In complete darkness, carrying all our possessions, we followed the guards. The narrow and uneven, slippery path sloped steeply down-hill to lead us to a riverbank with a jetty. This was the river port Cheboksary on the Volga, the largest river in Europe. A large paddle steamer was moored at the jetty. We were told to go on board.

Those were very anxious moments for us. Even those who knew Russia had no clue at all as to our whereabouts. We spent about 4 hours on that steamer, moving up stream. The Volga was enormous, so wide, that the other bank was hardly visible. The traffic, in both directions was quite heavy too. Mainly there were well illuminated at night, huge paddle steamers able to carry hundreds of passengers but also barges of various sizes, self-propelled or towed by powerful tugs.

At dawn we came to a river-stop on the other bank of the Volga. There, we were transferred on to a narrow-gauge train. The open flat wagons with planks nailed as benches looked as we were going on an excursion. But the real circumstances were clearly different. All around us we could only see a huge river and a dark forest. In a wide clearing, a web of sidings full of wagons loaded with logs. The only visible commodity were logs. Timber was everywhere, on the barges moored down below, on the embankment - stored orderly according to sizes, in huge stacks, or loosely strewn on the ground between the sidings.

There were people busy loading or unloading timber and... also there were some in uniforms, with rifles, guarding them! Now, we knew what kind of "picnic" we were going to.

The trip on those open trucks did not last long. The train, pulled by a small, puffing steam locomotive, was moving through the dense forest. From time to time we were passing a larger cutting, on which stood several gloomy barracks. Their external appearance did not indicate that they were inhabited, but we saw some people around them. After about two hours, our journey came to an end. The train stopped in the middle of a settlement, similar to those we passed, consisting of a number of various size log cabins or barracks, spread on a sandy waste land on both sides of the railway track. Forest surrounded the whole place. There was hardly any green colour. No grass, just a few trees, some shrubs or bushes, almost no green vegetation at all. The barracks were dark brown, the soil sandy brown, the remote walls of forest - almost black. Along the track where we stopped, were huge stacks of logs piled up ready to be loaded and the ground around was covered with a thick layer of bark. All around us the prominent colour was brown-grey, just like our spirit at that moment.

The NKVD, travelling with us, ordered all to disembark and wait on the embankment for further instructions. They told us that we have reached our destination and soon we would be allocated to the barracks, where we will be staying! They did not tell us for how long...

Apart from a few NKVD guarding us we noticed there some other civilians. We could not tell if they were militia or civilians. All looked very busy, rushing here and there, keeping away from us. Most of the Russian wore

the same clothing: round peaked cap, khaki shirt (with narrow collar around the neck) worn outside the trousers and tied with a leather belt. Trousers, usually black, dropped into the soft knee-high boots.

As we sat waiting on the embankment someone slapped his forehead having been bitten by a mosquito. Immediately someone else did the same to his neck...within minutes more than a hundred people on the embankment were fending off swarms of bloodthirsty insects! Everybody was waving his or her arms in the air like windmills.

We did not have to wait for too long to find out that this was only the beginning of our struggle with pests. Outdoors with mosquitoes, midgets; vicious tiny black flies penetrating every possible slit in your clothes just to get to your skin, gadflies or large horseflies and ticks, and indoors with bedbugs and more mosquitoes.

It took some time, till all were accommodated in their quarters. The NKVD also showed us the settlement's office and the canteen. Despite being tired and dirty we went first to the canteen, as we had not eaten for so many hours and could not resist a luxury of sitting on chairs at a table.

The Brodowski family: Zofia - the mother, Wanda - her 19 years old daughter, Zygmunt - 9-10 years old son and an old Zofia's mother were allocated together with us to one log-cabin. It consisted of a room, in the middle of which were a brick stove and a large chimney stack. The only furniture were 3 rusty, broken metal bedsteads. There were no mattresses, no chairs, no table, nothing!

After the initial shock of seeing this, we started to organise ourselves. Although Mother learned Russian many years ago at school, she still spoke it almost fluently, while the rest of us knew very little. Therefore, Mother was the one who took the initiative. She found the appropriate officials and sufficient to say, that after a short time, we brought from a warehouse two buckets, a washbowl, a paraffin-lamp, and several large sacks, which after filling them with the straw, served as mattresses. Zygmunt found somewhere two damaged benches and a few pieces of planks, which we fixed as shelves. Anyway, instead of sitting in despair, we started making the best we could using the available resources.

By the time we unpacked our bundles and brought some water from the well it became dark. After so many nights on a moving train we were all looking forward to the first quiet night on solid ground even in these primitive sleeping arrangements. So, very soon we were fast asleep. Unfortunately, not for a long! Very shortly we all woke up scratching intensely. When we lit a lamp and found the reason. Bed bugs! Probably, they were starving, who knows how long since anyone was there to feed them and now, they tried to compensate for the missing meals. They were everywhere, they were marching up and down on the walls, like on a crowded promenade. They were on the ceiling too, from where they dropped down right on to the target - on us laying on the mattresses! It was unbearable, so in the middle of the night we ran away outside. It appeared that we were not the only ones... Outside of every barrack there were groups of people, all for the same reason! No one was asleep that night. But although there were no bed bugs outside, there were mosquitoes instead, waiting for every opportunity. Still, we preferred to spend the rest of the night under the sky. Being tightly wrapped with blankets, the mosquitoes were not so harmful and a lot less repulsive.

Next morning the authorities called a meeting. We were told that we were brought here to work. Our employer was a government-owned forest management company. Everybody able to work must do so. We would be paid according to our output. There would be a shop selling rationed bread and some other essentials if available. In the canteen the workers will have the priority, followed by the rest e.g. their families and children, if anything was left for them. Among those who work, the better meals will be sold to those fulfilling the daily targets first.

They also told us the official address which was: Maryiskaya S.S.R. – Yoshkar Ola – P.O. Box 14. The unofficial name was just Settlement Madary. (We were there from the first days of July 1940 to September 1941.)

From the left: I, Mother and Lutek) *in front of our cabin, on the first Sunday after our arrival to Madary*

Then, we were divided into groups. I was allocated to fell trees, to be a lumberjack, Lutek - to a horse cart to bring logs from the forest to the sidings, some other men were allocated to work as loaders, and so on. Women were directed to lighter work in the forest. We were told where to collect needed tools (saws, axes) and where to assemble next morning at the appointed time -sharp!

Some of the braver complained about the bed bugs and when all joined in the protest, the official promised to send people from the sanitary corps in order to eradicate the insects. Surprisingly, indeed a few days later they came and fumigated all barracks thoroughly. We did not have any insects after that, but the residue of the toxic fumes lingered for a long time affecting our eyes.

When a few weeks before in Lwów, we were awakened in the middle of the night and were given a few minutes to pack one suitcase per person only, understandably we picked our best clothes and the most valuable items. Not surprisingly then we arrived here in suits, not quite suitable for work as lumberjacks. Seeing us going to work next morning, carrying saws, axes and other tools, looked like a scene from a grotesque farce! Lutek e.g. turned

up in his almost new spotless Burberry overcoat, put on just to protect his quality suit.

When returning in the evening, after only one day of work, this expensive raincoat was ruined. It and Lutek's trousers were covered with black thick smears of tar used as a lubricant for the cartwheels...

Madary – our "workshop"

There is a Russian saying: "those unable to adjust will die". And this is very true. We were slowly getting used to our new life, with difficulties, sometimes with some pain, but we managed to survive. Quite often...what to say, by using some, not always completely honest tricks dictated by necessity.

For most of the time I was working several kilometres away from the Madary Settlement and only came home where Mother and Lutek were on Sundays. The rest of the week a few others and I stayed in the forest, in a

barrack close to the workplace. There were about 20 of us. All men, Poles and Jews, obviously also Poles but not Christians. Also, about 20 local people of Mongolian race Maryicians and Czuvashians - men and women. We all shared one large log cabin. There were two long common beds of boards on which we slept, side by side. We used one and they used the other. We did not communicate with them at all. Their language was incomprehensible and their primitive habits absolutely unacceptable to us. They ate their own food and it seemed to us that they were rather hostile towards us.

Inside, the stench was horrible, especially on wet and cold days, when our footwear was completely soaked and needed drying. We, as well as they, were wearing a locally made primitive kind of bast moccasins and strips of cloth wrapped round feet serving as socks. These were not washed for ages, so one can imagine the odorous emitted when hanging close to a red-hot iron stove which stood in the middle of the cabin.

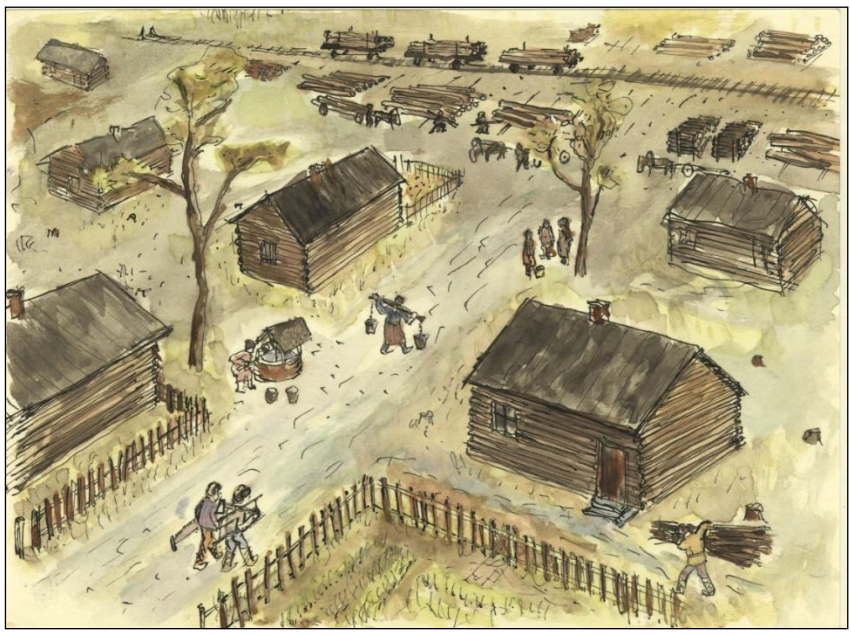
Add to this stuffy air the stink of drying other parts of our garments and also...personal share of so many people feeling unrestricted by any conventions!

Madary – a minute of rest

Although there were some windows in the cabin, they were fixed permanently shut and the only ventilation was through the door. In the summer the door stayed wide open, although inviting all sorts of insects including mosquitoes, particularly in the evenings. But in the winter, in order to preserve some warmth inside, it opened just to let someone through. If this lasted for a fraction of a second longer then necessary, immediately it provoked a chorus of protesting shouts.

It was nicely warm around the stove, but only few feet away it was freezing cold. Quite often, if no one added logs to the fire at night, in the morning we were finding icicles hanging from the low ceiling and our wet clothes were frozen stiff.

Cooked food was available twice a day, in the early morning, before we went to work, and in the evening, after we came back. It consisted either of thick sauerkraut soup or vegetable soup prepared from the cabbage and salted tomatoes. The frequency of the change of menu varied depending on the once-a-week supply of "raw materials", delivered in large barrels and picked at random by the delivery man from the warehouse. Anyway, both soups tasted and cost the same.



Madary – "our" Settlement

Every few days a sizeable plot of the fir forest had been allocated to each working party by the supervisor. We were working in a group of 5 men. Our job was to fell the trees (strictly in one direction only), the branches must have been neatly hacked of the logs and put aside in heaps (to be burnt in winter) and the logs cut in certain lengths. Towards the end of a working day the supervisor, comrade Yemyelin, came to mark the daily output. Needless to say, that with our physical and professional skill we rarely managed to fulfil an established target till... till we learned some tricks and increased our efficiency without the need for felling more trees! As soon, as our overseer left, we cut off a thin disc of a top of some logs already marked a few minutes before so, when he came the next day, he marked them again adding the score to our output. We had to be, of course, careful not to increase our efficiency to rapidly to avoid his suspicions. This way we made him happy, as being a supervisor of efficient workers, we satisfied the Forest Company as fulfilling government's targets and above all, we not only were earning more money, but also, we were entitled to better treatment in the canteen and the shop. We acquired an experience enormously useful for survival in Soviet Union.

Working as a lumberjack was very hard and dangerous to inexperienced workmen. In "my" working party, one of us, Bronislaw Linke was a well-known cartoonist till the war working with the weekly satirical magazine "Szpilki" (Needles), another one Mr. Polaczek was a businessman from Bielsko, and another one was a son of a wealthy owner of a night club in Lódz. Sometime later the local authorities learned who Bronek Linke was and took him of the job and employed him as an artist to make occasional posters, placards and decorations. Any time he could justify his request he would ask for my assistance. I remember a few such occasions when "we" were creating a very large war propaganda slogans depicting heroic Red Army soldiers fighting the Germans.

Six years later, after the war we met again, this time in Warsaw, where he resumed his old job. Sadly, he died of cancer shortly after.

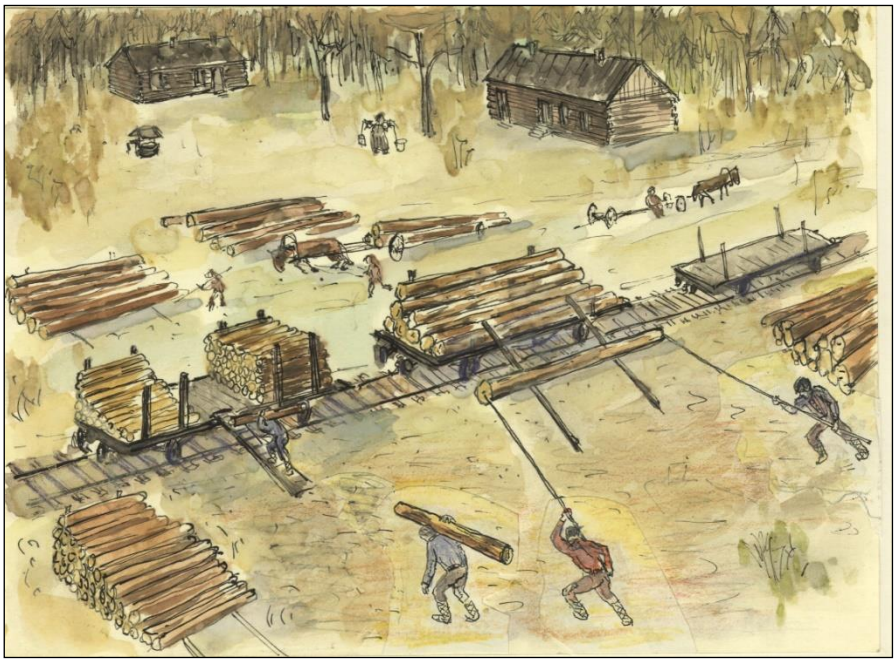
On the second day of my career as a "woodsman", I was cutting a tree which falling down struck Mr. Polaczek. Luckily, at that moment he was picking some berries in a small depression, and thanks to this, although the tree fell on top of him, it did not crush him, nevertheless we were both shocked.

Small accidents occurred quite frequently, mainly while chopping off branches using axes. They easily bounced of the hard knots and if not careful, could cause serious wounds. We soon learned how to work safely.

Mosquitoes were giving us a lot of trouble. Even worse were the tiny black flies (midges), which penetrated the smallest gap in shirts or trousers. When it was hot and we were sweating, it was particularly tiring to work being so tightly dressed, as we had to be because of those flies. In the winter though there were no insects but instead the deep snow and severe cold made the working conditions not much better. The temperatures could drop to minus 40 degrees Centigrade. We wore quilted (with cotton wool) trousers and similar jackets, padded fur caps and thick gloves. Usually, first thing after arriving at a plot, we lit a bonfire on which, as a part of our work, we burnt the cut off branches and all other useless growth in order to clear all rotting matters. During our short lunch breaks we used to make toasts from the sour and very heavy bread on the bonfire. The daily ration of 400 grams (less than 1 lb.) to which we were entitled to was no more than three slices of it. We also took with us a bottle of unsweetened black tea, which in the winter we would warm up by the fire. There was no drinking water in the forest, but we learned to extract and drink the sap from birch-trees.

The loaders - and I was one of them periodically, worked at the sidings, in the central point of the settlement, and not in the remote part of forest, as the fellers did. The work of the loaders was physically more demanding but also better paid. The loading of different lengths of logs was carried out without any help of mechanical gadgets. Logs, 8-foot-long and very heavy had to be single-handedly carried on a shoulder, climbing a steep plank on to a wagon. Longer logs were pushed on slide-blocks by two men using special poles. The target was high and almost impossible to... “by-pass”.

There were also the carters. Their task was to transport felled timber from the forest to the sidings and stack them there for loading on to trains. Their work started early in the morning in the stables. Each carter had a horse assigned to him, which had to be fed and cleaned and then harnessed to a special under-carriage. The work required not only physical strength, but also some skill in understanding and treating the horse. For short time I worked as a carter, but because of an unpleasant incident with a horse I asked to be transferred to my previous job.



Loading

At the outbreak of the war, less than a year earlier, people like I, fleeing from the Germans, left their Polish hometowns and found themselves a few hundred kilometres away in the east of Poland. We were Polish citizens of course. A year or so later the same people (I among them) were deported deep into the Soviet Union by the NKVD. We were not sentenced by any court, we were not told of the reason for the deportation, and no one attempted to change our Polish documents.

This way I and the others found ourselves somewhere in the middle of nowhere, inside the vast Russia, still as Polish citizens but without any established status nor any Russian documents. Without valid documents it was impossible to travel or to work, in other words to live in Soviet Union.

On the other hand, in Madary we were not really imprisoned. I presume that because it was so far from civilisation, the NKVD was completely certain that nobody without documents would ever attempt to escape from there. We were free to move around the Settlement, there was no curfew, we walked to work unsupervised, in our free time we could even go

swimming in the nearby lake, we could stroll, pick mushrooms or berries, do whatever we wanted if... we had enough strength.

As we discovered some time later, there were also some local Russians who, deported many years earlier by Stalin, lived there permanently. There was an old man with his wife whose job was to sharpen our saws and axes. There was the Forester with his wife; they even lived in a spacious forester's lodge on the outskirts of Madary. They kept a cow and Mother used to buy fresh milk from them occasionally. And there was also a very old ex-army surgeon, a very strange and taciturn man, prescribing only aspirin or quinine, if someone feeling sufficiently unwell went to him to ask for help. I think, this was the only medicine he possessed. We suspected that he was exiled there many years before the Revolution by the Tsar, but we never spoke with him about this. There were also a few other people living and working in the shop, in the canteen and in the Company's office, though we never had any close contacts with them so as to talk freely. Undoubtedly, they also were exiles, the victims of Stalin.

One small log-cabin was the home of the two NKVD men, permanently residing in Madary: one private and one lower rank officer, rarely seen at the Settlement. They never bothered us and as far as I know everybody ignored their presence.

Twice a week, Moshko, a carter, drove to Dubovaja - a regional HQ - to collect mail for us - letters and also...parcels! The delivery day was a big event. The post was always distributed in the canteen in the evening. People gathered there and while waiting for Moshko were chatting excitedly. The possibility of receiving a letter was always exciting. Then, Moshko would come with a bundle of letters, the buzz would suddenly subside and he would start calling out the names.

I must say that our name was read comparatively often. Till June 1941, the start of the war between Germany and Russia, it was possible to exchange correspondence with the German-occupied Poland, where most families lived. But after June 1941 the correspondence with Germany ceased and from then many separated families were cut off from their relatives.

As long as it was possible, we kept contacts with Mother's sisters in Radom and her brother Samek in Rowne. From him we also received a couple of

large and extremely useful to us parcels with food and clothing. But the most delightful news for us was the first, since the start of the War, news from Adaś. His postcard written several months earlier and posted originally to our old address in Lwów, was sent to us by uncle Samek. There were only a few words in it. The card was from a mysteriously sounding place Coetquidan in France, which as we found out much later, was then the birthplace of the Polish Army in France to which he volunteered.

I mentioned earlier that the log-cabin in Madary was our "home". Yes, it was now a home, though we never lost hope that it was only a short lasting, temporary place. We shared it with the Brodowski family.

Mr. Brodowski, as an aeroplane constructor employed by the Polish state-owned aviation industry in Warsaw, was evacuated at the outbreak of the war in September 1939. He managed to cross the border with Romania, but his family, wife and children, only reached Lwów. There they remained till the deportation by the NKVD a year later. They had not heard of him since the separation already more than two years earlier. We were then a few thousand miles away from Madary, still together with the Brodowskis. Despite changing our addresses several times, we still managed (directly or indirectly) some contact with our family abroad, among others with Adaś. The Brodowskis were not so lucky, they had no correspondence at all. And all of a sudden, when they lost all hopes, a letter from Mr. Brodowski arrived to them, from England! For them this was an unforgettable day, at last they found him alive and well.

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From the left: Lutek Gelibter, Regina Gelibter, Wanda Brodowska, Zofia Brodowska and Bronislaw Gelibter – Madary - March/April 1941

They were completely taken aback - how on earth did he get their address. Shortly after we found out how. Adaś, already serving in the RAF met one Capt. Brodowski, also an officer in RAF. After some conversation they found that their closest relatives are in Russia and they not only know each other well, but were also staying together.

Whether Adaś met Capt. Brodowski by coincidence, or whether he was specially looking for him, I cannot tell. Enough, that thanks to Adaś the Brodowskis found each other.

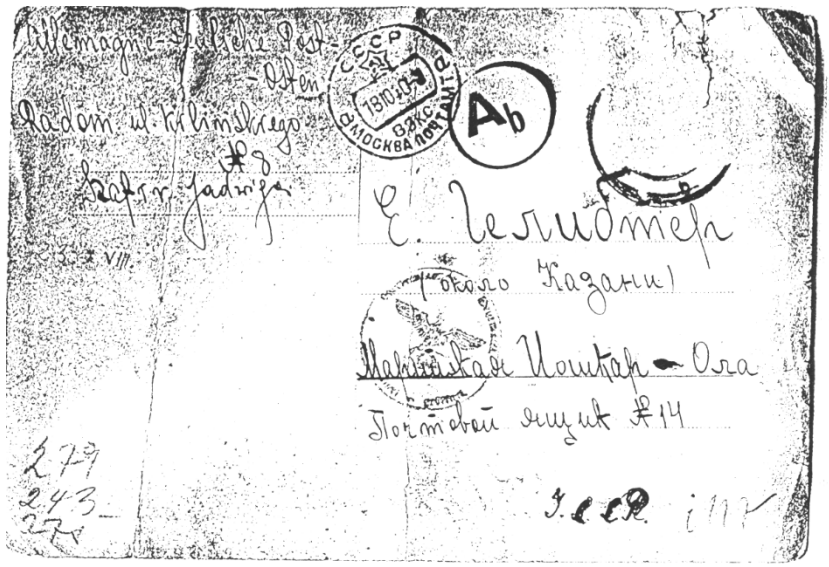
Back to Madary, to our "home". We all tried to make it as habitable as possible. We had a bright paraffin lamp, plenty of wood for the stove, we fixed our beds, even hanged some curtains in the windows. The wooden floor was cleaned, the walls whitewashed, and it was quite cosy. After a long week of hard work and living rough in squalid condition in the forest, I could not wait for Saturday evening to go back home. To me it was so nice, when at home Mother waited for me with my favourite thick pea-soup. But first I used to go to the common sauna to have a good wash. After the meal it was lovely to lay down in a clean bed and almost immediately fall

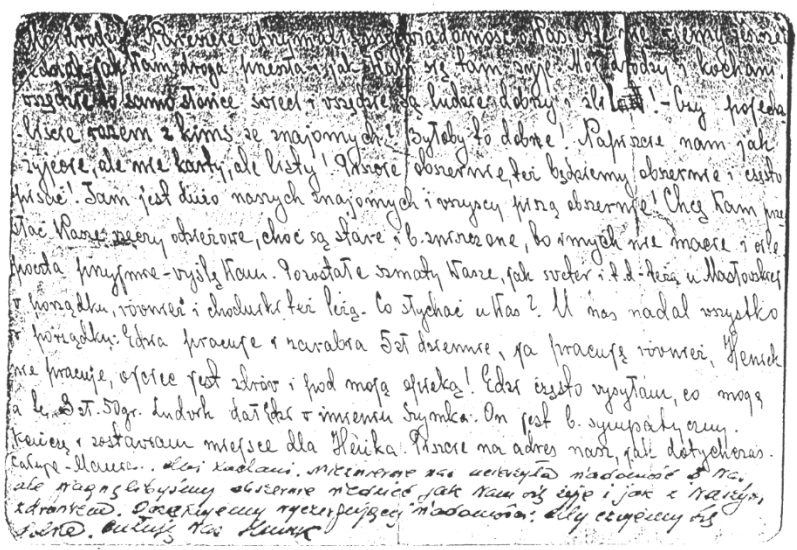
fast asleep. Despite that I still had to share the bed with Lutek, it was still comfortable, at least for me!

In the following Spring we cultivated a small plot allotted to us for growing of potatoes and other vegetables. From the stables I got plenty of horse manure, from the friendly Forester we got some seeds and advice. We have never previously had any encounters with gardening before. The closest thing to it, I remember, was my Mother re-potting houseplants in Sosnowiec! But we were full of enthusiasm and imaginations. A few months later our work paid off indeed. We picked quite a lot of potatoes, we had some carrots but the tomatoes though large and plentiful, grew with black spots inside. Apparently, the horse manure was too strong for them, and they rotted before getting ripe. Well, it was not the last of our agricultural experiences. Year or so later, in a warmer climate, we tried a different crop. But it was still a long way off at that moment.

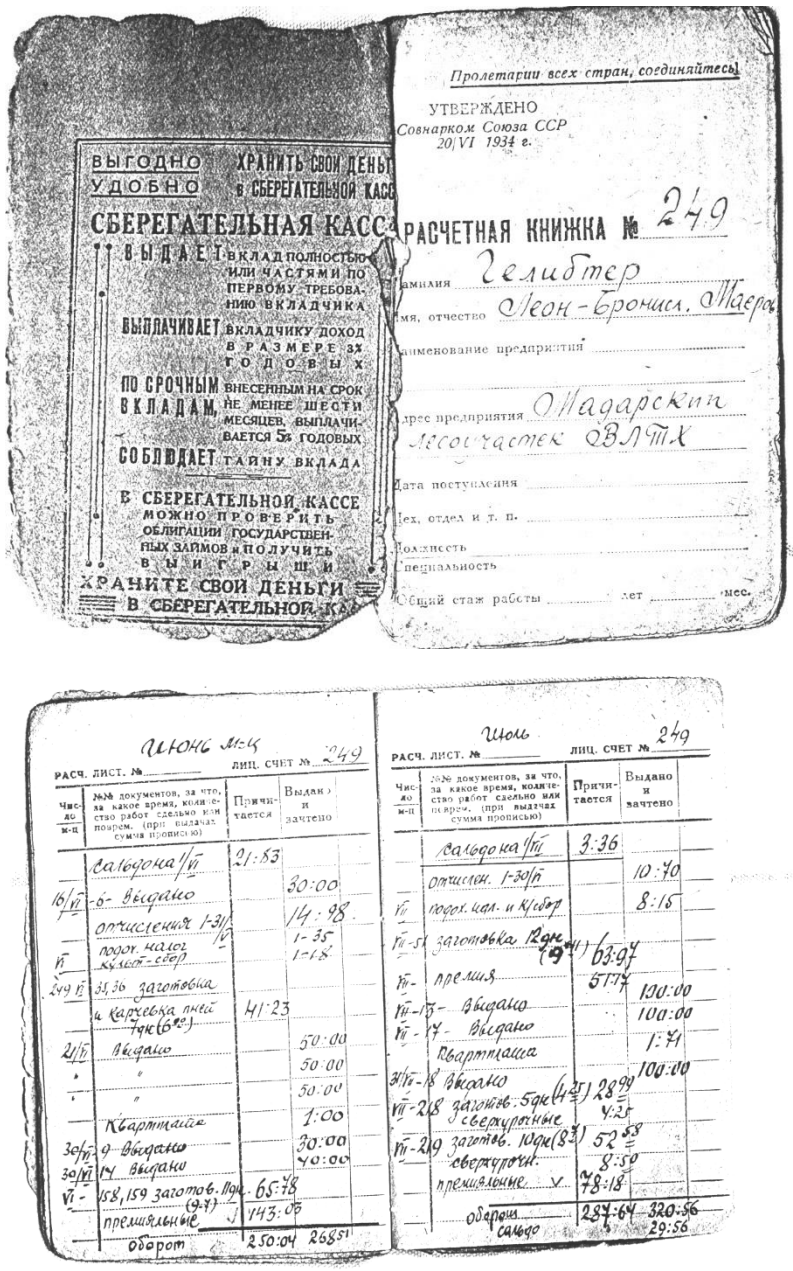
Lutek, my oldest brother, shortly after the first day incident with his Burberry coat, succeeded to get an office job. I do not remember whether they had a cable-radio (sort of a Tannoy) in the Office, or may be the Manager received newspapers, but Lutek was always bringing us news, so we vaguely knew what was going on in the world. One day he came with shocking news: the Germans, despite the pact of non-aggression started an unprovoked invasion of the Soviet Union! The date was 21 of June 1941! Not one of us fully realised then how drastically this would change our situation.

Indeed, sometime later, perhaps a month or so, we were called to the local NKVD. There to our greatest astonishment we were told that thanks to the generosity of the Government of the Soviet Union, our sentence of three years of exile had been quashed, and from now on we are free. If we would like to leave Madary, we will be supplied with appropriate documents.





One of the postcards from my aunt in Radom sent to us in Madary.



Пролетарии всех стран, соединяйтесь!

УТВЕРЖДЕНО
Совнарком Союза ССР
20/VI 1934 г.

ВЫГОДНО ХРАНИТЬ СВОИ ДЕНЬ
УДОБНО В СБЕРЕГАТЕЛЬНОЙ КАСС

СБЕРЕГАТЕЛЬНАЯ КАСС

ВЫДАЕТ ВКЛАД ПОЛНОСТЬЮ ИЛИ ЧАСТЯМИ ПО ПЕРВОМУ ТРЕБОВАНИЮ ВКЛАДЧИКА

ВЫПЛАЧИВАЕТ ВКЛАДЧИКУ ДОХОД В РАЗМЕРЕ 3% ГОДОВЫХ

ПО СРОЧНЫМ ВКЛАДАМ, ВНЕСЕННЫМ НА СРОК НЕ МЕНЕЕ ШЕСТИ МЕСЯЦЕВ, ВЫПЛАЧИВАЕТСЯ 5% ГОДОВЫХ

СОБЛЮДАЕТ ТАЙНУ ВКЛАДА

В СБЕРЕГАТЕЛЬНОЙ КАССЕ МОЖНО ПРОВЕРИТЬ ОБЛИГАЦИИ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫХ ЗАЙМОВ И ПОЛУЧИТЬ ВЫИГРЫШИ

ХРАНИТЕ СВОИ ДЕНЬГИ В СБЕРЕГАТЕЛЬНОЙ КА

РАСЧЕТНАЯ КНИЖКА № 249

Фамилия Гелибтер
Имя, отчество Леон-Бронисл. Шаер
Наименование предприятия
Адрес предприятия Шадарский лесоучасток ЗЛПХ
Дата поступления
Цех, отдел и т. п.
Должность
Специальность
Общий стаж работы ... лет ... мес.

Июнь мес

РАСЧ. ЛИСТ. № ... ЛИЦ. СЧЕТ № 249

Число м-ц	№№ документов, за что, за какое время, количество работ сдельно или поврем. (при выдачах сумма прописью)	Причитается	Выдано и зачтено
	Сальдо на 1/VI	21:83	
16/VI	-6- Выдано		30:00
	отчисления 1-31/V		14:98
VI	подоход. налог и к/сбор		1-35
			1-18
249 VI	35,36 заготовка и карчевка пней 7дн (6 раб.)	41:23	
21/VI	Выдано		50:00
"	"		50:00
"	"		30:00
	Квартплата		1:00
30/VI	9 Выдано		30:00
30/VI	14 Выдано		40:00
VI	158, 159 заготов. 10дн (9-7)	65:78	
	премиальные	143:06	
	оборот	250:04	268:51

Июль

РАСЧ. ЛИСТ. № ... ЛИЦ. СЧЕТ № 249

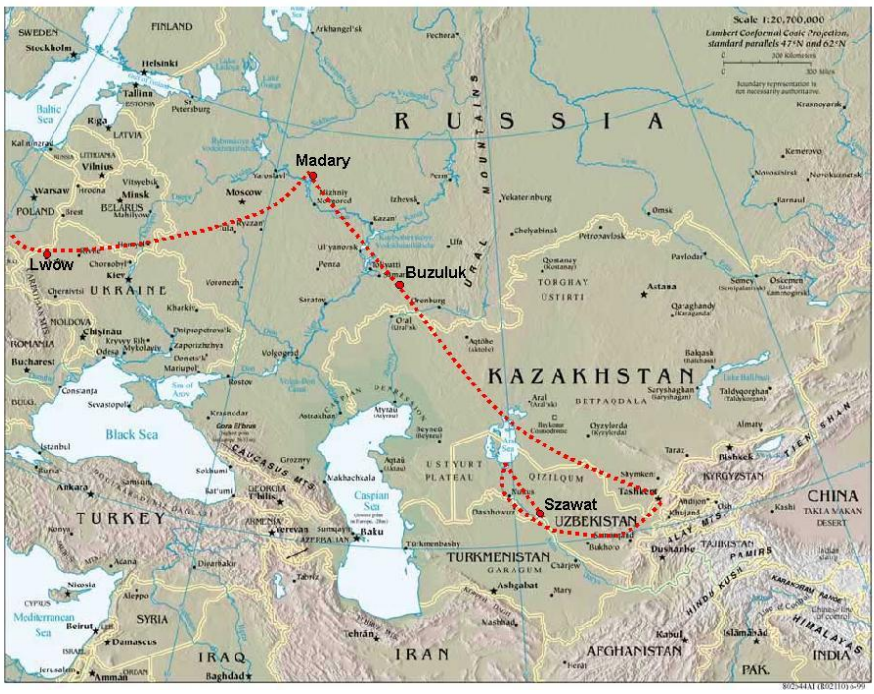
Число м-ц	№№ документов, за что, за какое время, количество работ сдельно или поврем. (при выдачах сумма прописью)	Причитается	Выдано и зачтено
	Сальдо на 1/VII	3:36	
	отчисл. 1-30/VI		10:70
VII	подоход. нал. и к/сбор		8:15
VII-5	заготовка 12дн (9+1)	63:97	
VII-	премия	51:77	130:00
VII-15-	Выдано		100:00
VII-	17- Выдано		1:71
	Квартплата		100:00
31/VII-18	Выдано		
VII-218	заготов. 5дн (4+1) сверхурочные	28:90 V-25	
VII-219	заготов. 10дн (8+2) сверхурочн.	52:58 8:50	
	премиальные V	78:18	
	оборот	287:64	320:56
	сальдо		29:56

My wages account book – June-July 1942.

Free again

Much later we learnt that this decision (to let us go free from Madary) happened only because since the German invasion, England and the Polish Government in exile became allies of the Soviet Union and imposed on her great pressure to free all Polish people held there.

We did not hesitate for a moment, we wanted to go away from Madary, anywhere, so long as it was somewhere in the South. Firstly, because we were dreaming of a warm climate and also because we heard of such a plentiful supply of fruit and other food there.



So, the decision was to go to Tashkent in the Uzbek SSR.

The least complicated route South was to board a regular direct passenger steamer in Kozmodemiansk to Astrakhan on the river Volga. Kozmodemiansk, I think, was the nearest port from Madary. From Astrakhan we could continue further, or we could even change our destination.

A few days later, we were packed, equipped with the tickets and most importantly with the documents, without which it would be impossible to travel in the Soviet Union - we were ready to go.

It was the beginning of September 1941 as we - already a free people left Madary. The same train used for transporting logs felled by us not so long ago, and the same which 15 months earlier brought us from the port on the Volga to Madary, this time took us back to the banks of the river. From there we got to the port of Kozmodemiansk by a local ferry. There we joined a large crowd waiting at the pier for the boats. Ours was a long distance one going downstream, to the South.

The Russo-German war was into the 3-rd month, and the unstoppable German Panzer Divisions were advancing continuously, taking hundreds of thousands of Russian prisoners and destroying thousands of tanks. They were already approaching Kiev, the Capital of Ukraine. The Red Army was in disarray and unable to offer effective resistance. Also, in the North in Belorussia, the Germans were steadily moving forward and closing in on Moscow.

Not all ordinary Russians fully understood the drastic situation on the front but we did. From our own experience, knowing the German brutality, especially towards the Jews, we were horrified when listening to the camouflaged news of their steady advance on all fronts!

Therefore, the journey we had just began, appeared to be not just an escape from our detention in Madary, from very hard work in the forest full of mosquitoes, from cold winter and from hunger, it was also a move to stave off the steadily growing danger of being caught - for a second time - by the Nazis.

All regular boats sailing in both directions would stop at the pier. Every time they approached, large part of the waiting crowd rushed disorderly to the narrow gangway trying to force their way on board, even before the crew secured the moorings. Some did not wait for the gangway and were jumping onto the deck, strait from the riverbank. There was a lot of shouting, screaming, pushing, jostling, the stronger were using elbows to get in front. But not always there was room for everybody. The less lucky had to wait for the next boat.

After many hours of waiting and unsuccessful trials, eventually we too got on board of a large paddle-steamer. It was absolutely full. How many passengers were on it, is impossible to tell. People with their bulky bundles, packages and suitcases, were occupying every inch of the floor, even blocked escape passages on all decks. We too eventually found some space for a journey lasting at least two days.

What did we eat during our voyage, where did we wash, how did we manage with the requirements of nature - I remember very little but what I do remember was an often-heard desperate cry: "help, catch the thief" sounding from all over the place. Indeed, there were gangs of insolent thieves. They stole money, food, whole bundles, they would even cut out a side of the suitcase and remove the whole contents while the undisturbed passenger was asleep on top of it.

But when the security guards or Militia caught some of them, instead of arresting them they expelled them from the boat on the nearest stop. In a few minutes the thieves were back! They managed somehow to jump back on board unnoticed despite the boat already a few feet away from the bank. I think, the Militia and the crew shared the loot with them and that is why they almost ignored their activities.

Although the whole crowd on board was dressed quite poorly, there were among them some men outstandingly scruffy. These men in rags were clearly in a deplorable state looking extremely exhausted. Some of them were Poles just released from the Gulags. They were freed at the same time and on the same grounds, as we. Definitely their conditions in Gulags were incomparably worse to ours in Madary. We were much luckier, comparing to them; we were like on holidays. Perhaps as a family we were kept in detention places of much less severe regime than they? Or was it just luck?

They heard that apparently somewhere near Kuybyshev a Polish Centre opened recently. All Poles freed from Gulags in need of help were trying to get there. They were telling us such stories that we doubted if they are not someone's fantasy.

Because our boat terminated in Kuybyshev, we and also the Brodowskis had to disembark there anyway. While waiting for the further connection to the South, we wanted to find out the true version about the Polish Centre.

Indeed, on the embankment there were two official delegates with the white-and-red (Polish national colours) armbands, already talking with some Poles. Soon more men from the boat joined them.

What they were telling us was difficult to believe. It was almost exactly what we heard on the boat. Till the German invasion of Russia in June, Poland was an enemy of the Soviet Union. But now the Soviets acknowledged Polish Government in exile in London as an ally and agreed on creation of a new Polish Army in Russia, which would fight side by side with the Red Army. The recruitment to the Army was to be made mainly among exiled Poles, prisoners of war and all those recently freed from Gulags or other detention camps.

Buzuluk

As a result of this agreement, in Buzuluk, about 150 km by train from Kuybyshew where we now were, Polish Army recruitment office was established. There was also a hospital for the sick and a welfare centre for all Poles and their families. The Polish representatives strongly appealed to everybody to go there. All who till now suffered in Gulags did not need to be persuaded, for them it was salvation, an invitation to the promised land.

For some time, Lutek and I often discussed our inability to take any part in the War, which made us mere passive onlookers. We both felt that our place, our moral duty was to join the fight against Hitler. We really wanted to add our personal contribution to the cause and felt guilty for what could look like hiding safely behind those who were sacrificing their lives. Now, hearing about the recruitment to the Polish Army, we saw the opportunity to enrol. Without any hesitations we made our minds and instead of waiting any further for the next steamer to travel further South, we changed our earlier plans, and all boarded a train taking us to Buzuluk.

In Buzuluk at the gate to the HQ compound, a Polish officer took our documents given to us by the NKVD in Madary, and without any particular formalities let us in. We did not pay any attention then that they did not give them back to us and that we were left without our identity papers. We did not think that quite soon lack of them may be of great consequences to us. We believed then that our peregrination in the Soviet Union had come

to an end and from now on exclusively Polish authorities would take care of us and we should never need those papers again. Unfortunately, we did not realise how wrong we were! We could not foresee that within the next few weeks Poles in Buzuluk will be playing a role of a pawn in a political game between Soviet and Polish Governments.

But so far this was not affecting us, we did not know of anything going on between the Governments in Moscow and in London.

Inside the camp, among many civilians there were already some soldiers and officers in new Polish uniforms with Polish insignias! No further back than a month before such things were impossible to see in the Soviet Union! So, after all, it was true what they told us earlier about the new Army! To Lutek and me it was the beginning of a new chapter for which we were waiting so anxiously. But so far, our first concern was to adapt ourselves to our new circumstances. The fenced off camp was situated on the outskirts of a town. It was probably a school before - a few typical buildings and a large playground surrounding them. The number of rooms and their capacity was absolutely not sufficient to accommodate an already too large number of people who continued to arrive every day.

On arrival, we were assigned to one of several groups. The first was the group of ex-higher-rank-officers; the next: ex-lower rank officers; next, were their families, next, a group of civilians, who in the past were employed as important civil servants; next... and next... sufficient to say, that people with certain names (not typically Polish), among them ours, were in the last group. What it meant in practice? Well, quite a lot - some groups were more privileged than others...

All rooms in the buildings accessible to us, were equipped with threefold bunkbeds made up from raw boards - with no mattresses on them. When we arrived, all were already occupied, and no Official was interested in where to put us for the night. We were left to our own devices. Happily, the Brodowskis were allocated to quarters assigned for the wives of officers and they took Mother with them. So at least Mother found a paillasse for herself. Whereas Lutek and I every night tried to find a bit of space where to sleep. I remember one or two early nights spent half sitting on a window ledge, one or two nights sleeping on a staircase, until I discovered a small empty

and very low cellar to which the entrance was blocked with a cast iron manhole. It was completely dark there and stinking of rats, but at least I could lay down fully stretched. Since then, it was occupied by two of us only, well... plus the rats. We had to guard our secret closely because many other people like us were looking for any space just to lay down for the night. Of course, no one was even dreaming of changing into pyjamas...we slept in what we wore all day. We were still luckier than some, at least we could keep our suitcases safe with Mother. Thanks to this we could have a clean shirt or underwear from time to time. We washed ourselves and did washing wherever water was available, no matter cold or warm. A few taps only in toilets were working and they were surrounded by long queue of men trying to do the same.

Personal hygiene was a serious problem. With so many people crowded in a limited space and majority sleeping rough, without any possibilities of changing their clothes, without a proper washing facilities and laundry, it was almost impossible to avoid being infected with lice, mainly brought here by those from Gulags. Despite all assurances given to them on the embankment, they still were wearing their old rags and hardly got the needed attention they were promised.

Food was another problem. There was only one kitchen catering for us in the camp. We had to queue in the open regardless of the weather, outside a small window through which the food was served into our own canteen. My group, the last one in the order, had to wait a long time to get our portions. Usually, the tea or soup were completely cold by the time it got to us.

It was already October, and the weather was changing quickly. Rainy and cold days became more frequent. Stepping outside during heavy rainfall on slippery clay footpath and lining up in a long queue for a portion of bread, or for a few scoops of some soup was not only very uncomfortable but also humiliating. Large number of men, suffered from malnutrition and diarrhoea; they were dressed inadequately for the weather conditions and the results were clearly visible. The First Aid centre could not cope with so many cases and the diseases spread significantly.

The camp in Buzuluk was only a transitional one, the proper one where the regular army units were accommodated in tents, was in nearby Totskoye, about 50 km east. For many men the transfer to Totskoye was an immediate improvement in the standard of living. I too could not wait to be enrolled, not only to have a clean sheet to sleep on, but above all to see my long wish beginning to be realised. Unfortunately, for unknown to me reason, while some were successful, my enquires about my turn were left without a definite answer.

In the end I became so desperate that speaking once to a lieutenant dealing with enrolment, I offered him a bribe to speed up my enrolment. Mother, in order to obtain the money, sold a pillow and some other things. I met the Officer next day, handed over to him 400 rubbles (which was then quite a lot of money for us) and in return I received a solemn promise that within 2-3 days I will be in Totskoye and in uniform! Since then I did not see him anymore - not him, not the money, nor a uniform!

I concluded that there must have been a reason why many others succeeded, and I did not. In the meantime, Polish authorities began evacuating some groups of people from Buzuluk somewhere to the south of Russia, apparently near the border with Persia. Every few days the camp authorities displayed a list of people selected for the next transport. This was at a time of a steady advance of the German Army especially in the Ukraine, Kiev was already taken, and they were quite close to Moscow. Days were passing quickly. Progress of the Germans was also fast. Many of us feared, that if not evacuated in time we may be caught in Buzuluk. Others considered those included on the lists with envy as the lucky ones. The rest with increasing anxiety and impatience were waiting for their turn. Not surprising that the urgency grew with every bad news from the front.

It seemed that those compiling the lists were guided by the same priorities as when dividing us into groups on arrival. Unfortunately, our group was the last one. There were moments when we even considered leaving the camp individually, but when we asked for the return of our documents, we were told that all documents have been already taken away by Polish officials who went with the earlier groups of evacuees from Buzuluk. Without valid documents it was unthinkable to get rations books or to travel

in the Soviet Union, thus we were compelled to wait and to leave everything to chance.

There were persistent rumours that the Polish Government in London wanted to get as many Poles as possible out of Russia. Therefore, although initially it was agreed, that the new Polish Army will fight on the Russian soil, in reality they, the Poles, were organising mass transportation of all Poles including the new army units to Persia (now Iran). In Buzuluk no one knew for sure, or if they knew, did not want to tell what the real destination of the previous transports was.

All the disturbing news from the front, and the fear that because of the delay of our evacuation we may miss the chance of escaping from Russia increased the tension among the people still remaining. Then, one evening, after a few tense weeks of waiting, when we almost lost all hope of getting out of there, a new long list appeared on the wall, this time including our names and the Brodowskis.

Journey South

The same night several lorries took us to the local railway station, where on a platform was waiting an already familiar cattle wagon train with the doors wide open inviting us in. But there was distinguishably different spirit among us in comparison to that of 16 months ago. We were all excited as we knew that whatever happens it won't be worse, and it can only be better, much better!

The destination: somewhere south, where the sun shines, where it is warm, where there is plenty of fruit, where there is no war, where there is freedom!

I think that altogether there were about 1000 Poles in this transport. Similar to that in Lwów in June 1940 they were a mixture of people - men and women, little children and very old, singles and large families. For example, in our wagon, among others was a mature good-humoured fellow, always ready to help others, who was not concealing his previous profession of which he was almost proud... - he was a pickpocket in Warsaw! As a contrast, there was also a highly educated, frail old lady in her late 70s; a university professor's wife, ailing and completely helpless, whose husband

was arrested by the NKVD in 1940 and disappeared before she was deported alone.

All cattle wagons were adapted to the transportation of evacuees; equipped with two levels of bunks made of boards and erected on both ends of the carriage. The top bunk was taken by Mother, Lutek and I, and next to us was the Brodowski family: Grandmother Mrs. Morawska, her daughter Zofia with Wanda and Zygmunt. Roughly the same number of people were on the lower bunk underneath us, and this was repeated on the other end of the wagon. All those for whom there was no room on the bunks occupied the bare floor in the middle; at night spreading their "sleeping arrangements" and during the daytime packing them in bundles, thus enabling others to pass through to the door. Similarly, as in all these trains a large tube was fixed into one of the sliding doors to be used "in emergency" as a toilet.

The forthcoming journey into an unknown to me, almost exotic world, excited my curiosity. I wanted to know the names of the places we were passing; I knew that we would have to cross the imaginary border between Europe and Asia. I remembered vaguely a book that I read long ago about a boy who trekked on camels from Europe across Ural Mountains to Mongolia. From that book I remembered that the name of the last town in Europe was Orenburg. I wondered if we would take the same route and whether I will be able to recognise it - I did not want to miss this. I could not get to sleep, my eyes were glued to the monotonous landscape, but there was no Orenburg! (I didn't know that after the Revolution Orenburg was renamed to Chkalov, and that was the reason why I missed the Station.)

In fact, somewhere the train must have crossed that magic frontier because the names of many passing stations did not sound Russian anymore. Also, when we left Buzułuk it was cold and as we progressed south, it was getting warmer every day. The journey became boring. The same daily routine - any time the train stopped we were out looking for drinking water, for a place suitable for a "loo", for a "kypiatok". The only excitement was, if the stop was combined with distributing of bread rations or hot soup. Otherwise, there was nothing to do, no books, no newspapers, so we talked, we slept, we slept and talked, and could not wait to see where our journey will end...

But generally, and contrary to that tense period in Buzułuk, we were now relaxed and in a good spirit. There were no quarrels, as can often happen in circumstances when so many people must live together in a confined space, rather good humour prevailed. As an example, here is a story:

When the train stopped at a station, we knew more or less for how long we can leave our wagons, but often the train used to stop on a signal or just somewhere in the middle of a nowhere and for no apparent reason. Getting off for a "stroll" was always risky then and only for the younger and those agile enough to climb up the steep embankment and jump high up on to a wagon in case the train suddenly begun to move. For the older people every such trip was a real dilemma, they were not so quick and there were no steps to the wagons helping them to climb up!

One of the occupiers of the top bed-of-boards was the mentioned earlier Professor's wife. Of course, she did not belong to those ready to jump out as soon as the train was slowing down. Despite our assurances that we will help her, she was always very reluctant and hesitant to "go out", but in the end she would decide and start climbing down from her top bed, often just as the locomotive whistled and the wagons jerked!

Now, after 60 years, being almost her age then, I can imagine how she suffered, but for me and for many it was a good laugh then. Also, at that time, some of those sleeping on the floor often complained that something is dripping on them at night. Soon they found the reason. It appeared, that the lady used a plate (the only vessel she possessed) as a chamber pot! Carrying it to the door in darkness to empty it, balancing to avoid tripping on someone sleeping on the floor, and additionally doing this all in a moving train, was too much for her. The results were best known to those below! But, despite the contents, there was no ill feeling, just opposite, the events were taken lightly and with humour.

At times when our train was waiting on a siding, we could see how many similar transports were passing by. Some were also carrying heavy machinery, others wounded soldiers and partly damaged tanks, guns, but mainly the trains were with ordinary people. Every few minutes a train was rushing to the east of the Soviet Union, away from the front. Whole industrial plants with their production lines and their workers together with

families, millions of people, were being evacuated away from the front line. The Russians, with heavy losses were continuously retreating deeper and deeper into the land. They lost a number of their towns: Bryansk, Orel. The Germans already reached the famous Napoleonic battlefield of Borodino, which if lost would open the door to Moscow!

Tashkent

After several days our train came to a stop on a siding in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. It was a large and very busy railway junction. All over, almost on all sidings, were trains with evacuees; all identical to ours. People from those trains were wandering around, carrying water, bread or just stretching their muscles. A railway official told us that we would stay here for at least several hours because we would get some soup and bread and there was a long delay.

To us Tashkent was an exotic town, with long history dating back to Genghis Khan. Lutek and Wanda, knowing that we would be here for some time, could not resist and went just outside the Railway Station to have a look at the streets in the vicinity. They did not want to miss the opportunity of seeing at least something of this famous place. Their mothers were very much against their risky outing and begged them not to go. Both were anxious that the train might leave the station earlier, leaving them behind.

Unfortunately, their fears were justified! Soon after they left, the locomotive gave the signal, all people caught outside their wagons rushed and jumped in and the train slowly started rolling forward... without Lutek and Wanda!

We were dumb struck. Shouting did not help to stop the train. It was too late for us to get off the train not to be separated from them. The train started speeding up and every minute we were further away from them... The sudden separation was a terrible shock for both families. Both Mothers could not hide their despair. The chances of being reunited with their oldest offspring looked very slim. After all, Lutek did not know the destination or the train's code or the number of our transport. How then could they try to find us among millions of evacuees? At wartime, during the process of a massive evacuation, at large railway junction with at least tens of identical trains leaving Tashkent every hour in four different directions.... how to

trace one of them? Well, the first wagon of our train, occupied by the "hierarchy" was decorated with a few Polish flags and carried Poles only. That was the only distinction!

Indeed, Lutek and Wanda were returning to the station happy and pleased with their excursion, but they did not suspect what shocking surprise was waiting for them! Initially they thought that our train had been moved just to another siding. They went around looking for it, first slowly, then rushing a bit and in the end in a panic. Of course, they could not find it, we were miles away by then!

They did not have any money, no documents, and had nothing to eat, nothing to drink. To travel on a passenger train - (yes, there were some too) - they would not only have to buy a ticket but also obtain a boarding card. That was almost an impossible task for the ordinary Russian citizen, and for them far beyond boldest dreams. The only "trump card" they had was Lutek's ability to speak Russian.

They spent several nerve-racking hours on the platform, expecting that by a lucky chance they may come across another passing Polish transport. When they gave up all expectations of reuniting with their families a train with Russian soldiers stopped at the Station. Lutek started conversation with a group of them, told them what had happened and apparently raised enough compassion as they encouraged him and Wanda to risk illegal travel on their military train going to Samarkand. They eagerly seized this opportunity. With the help of their "confessors", for several long hours of the night, they succeeded to avoid any control. At dawn their train stopped at a small station. Next to their train stood one of the trains with evacuees. Suddenly Lutek spotted a white-and-red flag on one of the wagons. It was our train! In a fraction of a second, they jumped out and calling our names run along the stationary train.

It was a warm night and the sliding door was ajar. I was asleep but I do not think Mother was. I was awakened amid loud commotion when Lutek and Wanda were already inside! Well, there is no need to describe the emotion and tears of joy and happiness mixed with anger! An event lasting only one day could easily have turned into a tragedy for two families for at least several years if not for longer. Anyway, it was all over now.

Since leaving Tashkent the train was stopping more often and for longer. We passed Samarkand and one late evening we stopped at station called Kogon – a Bukhara's suburb. Although Samarkand and particularly Bukhara were even more famous than Tashkent, no one dared even to mention ... sightseeing.

Change of plan

Several hours elapsed and the train was still not moving. More and more people from the train stepped out and begun to gather in small groups and whisper with anxiously. Then I saw a couple of Russian (NKVD?) officers with gloomy faces marching towards our first wagon. After a while inside, they went with some Polish officials to the station building. It was a dark night; the platform was not lit and the whole atmosphere was tense and mysterious. In that moment someone noticed that the Polish flags disappeared from the first wagon and a woeful rumour went around that we are going to be deported again... somewhere beyond "big water"!

I rather knew geography and I remembered more or less where Tashkent or Bukhara were on the map. I could not remember the details, but I was sure that there was no sea in this part of the world, so why were they talking about "big water", what was this supposed to mean?! Anyway, it was frightening enough for some who decided to abandon the transport and try on their own. They took their belongings and disappeared in to the darkness, though soon some of them returned, whether of their own will or forced to do so, I do not know.

Not one of the Polish officials was willing to explain to us what really happened, but neither would they deny the circulating rumours. When we and some others demanded to be given back our documents, in order to be independent from the rest, they replied that our documents were sent away earlier with another transport...

After a short while the train moved again. The prevailing joyful spirit among us, till not long ago hoping that very soon we will find ourselves in Persia, rapidly changed to exactly the same gloom as when we were deported from Lwów!

Two hours later the train came to a halt. This time for good. The sign on a platform read: Farab. There were quite a number of armed soldiers around, though they did not look Russian, but they all wore Russian uniforms; the officers must have been Russians, I presume NKVD. We were told to disembark! They lead us to a nearby field and told to put our things down, because it may be some time till we get further orders. Within minutes a large wasteland was filled chaotically with nearly a thousand shocked people, many with crying children, some even in a panic, but all devastated.

It was late October 1941 or may be the beginning of November, yet despite the early morning hour the sun was giving pleasant warmth. A couple of hours later it was too hot in the sun but there was no shade anywhere round.

The "orders" were to wait. They gave us rations of bread. From what we heard, again as rumours only, we were to wait for the results of a diplomatic intervention in Moscow. There were around 800 -1000 people on a far too small "camping-place", side by side, each watching their belongings and jealously guarding every inch of an occupied square. Soon some people collected some twigs and lit small bonfires on which they tried to cook groats or just boil water for tea. Then again, it was the same highly embarrassing problem - lack of any kind of toilets. But... "one has to do what he has to do", no matter of the circumstances!

At least water was freely available from the irrigation dike not far away; very muddy and not quite suitable for drinking but it was something. The night came and we were still there, "bivouacking" in the open! As the temperature soared during the day, at night there was a slight frost. We were not prepared for wild "camping", shivering from cold we could hardly wait for the first sunrays...

We were there for 4 or 5 days! I cannot recollect any hot soup given to us during that time! Just the bread and may be some rice. People ate what was available to them. Many were just hungry and cold and above all they were let down, most disappointed.

For the whole time, despite the adverse fortunes, I was always interested in the new surroundings. During those few days in Farab everything fascinated me. It was my first close encounter with Asia. People of a different race and dressed differently; trees, other vegetation and fruits,

which I never saw before, different character of buildings - no red bricks, no wooden houses, no gable roofs - all made of clay, all the same colour as the soil there, the unmade roads; the only vehicles there were a strange carts on 2 enormous wooden wheels pulled by oxen, also camels and donkeys saddled as horses. If not for the real circumstances, I could imagine that I was in an exotic country like (then was) Morocco or Tunisia... In a world without television, the large majority, not counting those very privileged who could afford to travel, knew about other countries only from the magazines, books or the cinemas. Instead, the imagination worked harder...

Then, a number of uniformed and armed "soldiers" arrived, and after some commotion we heard the familiar command: "davaytye sobyeraytsa!" which meant "let's go!" Again, the whole lot, in a disorderly manner marched, loaded with bundles, suitcases, boxes, leading their children and barely able to walk old men and women. Happily, we did not have to go far; only to the nearby river port, where this time not a train but a huge barge was waiting for us.

Amu Darya

The river was very wide and muddy. Its ragged banks, not higher than 2 ft. were constantly washed away by the current. It flowed through a plain, flat and barren country. There was no green vegetation in sight. The soil in which the river carved its course was dry and cracked like a mosaic. There were some prickly shrubs growing, but they were of the same colour as the clay soil, or the water in the river - yellowish-brown. A real desert!

The river was Amu Darya, or Oxus as it was known in ancient times; one of the largest rivers in this part of Asia. It flows 1500 miles, from the Pamir to Aral Sea, mainly through the Karakum desert. And that was where we were, in an oasis with a nearby railway station called Farab. This was the last station just before a railway bridge over the river, through which we were to pass on our way to Persia, if not for the abrupt change of plans resulting in us being taken off the train.

We were led to a large barge moored at the bank. Its deck sloped and narrow, not wider than two feet did not have any kind of railing. In fact, it was not a deck at all, it was just a rim of a large, deep cargo hold used for

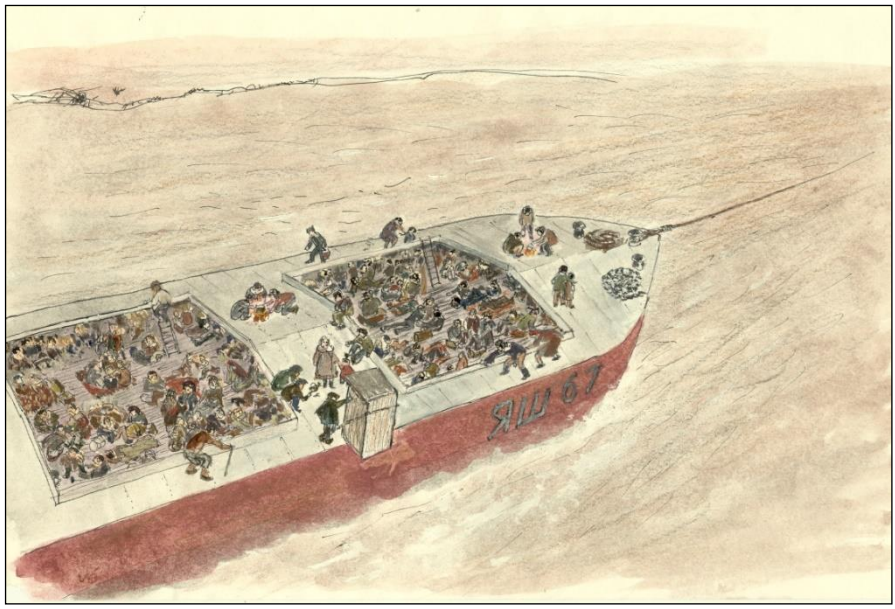
shipment of bulk goods, most probably cotton. There were four separate holds, each about 10 feet deep. To each hold were dropped vertical steps. The barge was built of steel and there were only two wooden structures on it. One, on the stern, was a small cabin housing the steering wheel and the other one, a primitive "outside"; a single loo, of a kind well known from anecdotes. The "loo" was almost hanging in the air with its back and side walls directly above the water and was fastened to the barge with couple of ropes only.

We were divided into groups of 80 - 100 people and each group assigned to a separate hold, thus in one barge was about 350 - 400 people. It was a difficult task for the older ones to step down the ladder, it was also not easy for the young and strong to get down with bundles, suitcases and other packages. On the wet steel bottom of the hold was a rough wooden grate, similar to those in some bathrooms, serving us as a floor on which we arranged ourselves for the journey.

Altogether there were three identical barges, all joined to each other by steel cables. Soon they attached a tow rope to the first barge and the whole convoy, pulled by a powerful tug, begun its way down stream, to the North, but where exactly - no one knew!

Everything indicated that the Russians were not prepared (at such a short notice?) to redirect and displace about 1000 Poles. However, we were no longer to be treated as "criminals", as was the case before. They had to find a suitable place for us, providing accommodation, organising transport and feeding points for the duration of the journey, supplying at least bread, hot soup or "kypyatok" (boiling drinking water). What's more the chosen route was away from the already functioning existing system of mass-evacuation.

Of course, we were the ones who felt the consequences! The barges did not have any facilities for carrying people, there was no room to wash, nothing to sit on, not mentioning to rest for the night. There was no drinking water, (on a train at least we could find it at the stations), a single unsafe toilet was absolutely not sufficient for so many, besides for the old, infirm, mothers with babies, small children the toilet was beyond reach anyway. There was nowhere else to find shelter, and everything had to be done in public view - barges do not stop like trains...



If one realises that only a few days earlier, just hours separated us from crossing the border of the Soviet Union, one can understand our present profound disappointment! It was only hours since we almost began celebrating the end of our misery... and now again, everything started all over again...

During the long journey on the barge we learned to drink the muddy water from the river, even to soak biscuits (stale bread) in it. On two occasions the tug stopped to take on fuel and once, against the will of the NKVD officer travelling on the tug, the current pushed our barge too close to the shore. It was enough for a few who jumped out to collect bundles of brushwood, the only "commodity" ...available there anyway, apart from which there was nothing else to pick. But it was still quite a valuable commodity to us! Having some dry twigs, one could make a small fire on the barge deck and boil a kettle or rice.

On the fourth or may be fifth day of sailing our journey came to an end. The "port" where we were ordered to disembark was - as everything else around - far from civilised norms. We were stepping off the barges using barely secured planks. There were no buildings around, just an empty piece of land on which we were told to stop. Here and there grew some solitary

trees and shrubs. In the distance, there were some strange looking clay shacks, quite similar to those in Farab, which - as we found out later - were the ordinary common households here. Everything looked even more oriental here! The people also were dressed differently. Men, all unshaven, many with long beards, wore enormous size fur caps, quilted jackets on top of wadded vests, and quilted trousers dropped into soft leather knee boots. Women also covered their heads with an embroidered cap and a silk scarf or shawl. They all had black glossy hair pleated in long, thick tresses. Their vests were short and also embroidered, dresses were worn over long trousers and tied at the bottom. Almost no one spoke Russian.

They were Karakalpaks, a tribe of Uzbeks. The port where we landed was Kungrad, in the delta of Amu-Darya's estuary on the southern shore of the Aral Sea. The only possible connection with the "outside world" (or civilisation) was either to sail about 400 km across the Aral Sea to Aralsk, or to sail up the river for about 500 km to Tsheboksary i.e. to the same place where we came from. There was a third possibility: trekking with a caravan of camels through the desert for several weeks... About 15-20 years later the Soviets built a railway to Kungrad. Of course, all this, the names and the geographical position I learned much later - while there I knew nothing.

After some time, a number of 2-wheeled carts pulled by oxen arrived. We loaded our things, and they also took all those unable to walk. The rest had to follow them on foot. We walked like a cortege behind a hearse at the funeral. The unmade track lead us through the large fields of low growing bushes full of white fluffy buds - I rightly guessed, it was cotton - but also there were smaller fields of maize. I could see no other vegetation there apart from a few trees. No green meadows, no cows grazing on green pastures, no such pictures with which we normally associated the country landscape.

In the meantime, it became dark as we arrived to a village. The houses were almost identical to those described earlier. Using sign language, the driver indicated to us a door to a room assigned to us: Mother, Lutek and I - what happened to others, I did not know. They surely must have been given accommodations somewhere nearby. I am aware that by saying "room" one may think of a room, as normally we understand the meaning of this word. Our "room" was in fact a chamber in which walls, ceiling and the floor were

made of clay mixed with chaff. In all four walls were so many holes that they looked like Swiss cheese. In one corner was a kind of stove (of the same material) big enough for one pot only, with a permanent opening on the top and a larger hole in the front, allowing to light a fire under the pot. In one of the walls instead of a window, was an aperture not larger than a square foot, with a pane of glass build into it. On the uneven floor were some straw mats. There was nothing else inside. When and by whom had this "room" been used before, who knows?

We picked some brushwood and lit a fire, which gave us not only warmth but light as well. I took a kettle and went to seek some water. It was a very dark night, there was no one around to ask, nowhere any visible signs of anybody living here and in the middle of it was I, completely lost and I must say... not feeling too confident. I saw a door ajar, in absolute darkness and went in. It was a long corridor with another door at the end and there I noticed a flickering light. Well, at last, someone must be there. I didn't know, whether to cough, or to say something like: "excuse me", so I went silently ahead until... until I approached the next room. I stopped at the doorstep frighten to death by what I saw there! In the light of a flickering candle I saw a human shape, covered in a white shroud, squatting on the floor and amid loud gurgling noises exhaling clouds of smoke! Luckily that figure did not notice me. I have never seen anything like this in my life!

I was so terrified, that I turned around and started to run away. What I imagined then was, that perhaps I saw a mysterious ceremony of a sorcerer, which I should not have watched and therefore I may be caught and tortured...

I returned "home" empty handed not saying a word about my adventure. Gradually, this episode begun to sound quite funny to myself and inside I started to laugh of my own stupidity.

As I found out later, the "mysterious ceremony" was nothing else than someone smoking a common in these parts a water-pipe or hookah.

In this moment a local man came. He was very friendly and tried to be helpful. With his knowledge of a few Russian words, plenty of sign language and patience we found out many useful things from him. In the

end, we had water, we cooked some grouts, we washed and very tired and exhausted after a long tiring day, went to sleep on those straw mats.

In the middle of the night Mother woke us screaming and shaking from fear. We immediately lit a candle and in the light of it I saw a picture - to me so amusing. The culprits were... tiny little mice. Apparently, these holes in the walls must have been connected by a labyrinth of corridors behind the surface, because the mice were appearing here and there, playing hide-and-seek, or perhaps there was so many of them? They seemed to be watching us with their little black eyes. They were so pretty and innocent. I could not understand why on earth Mother was so terrified. Anyway, I doubt if she could get back to sleep but I did.

We were in Kungrad a couple of days only. We didn't even manage to familiarise ourselves with the surroundings. One day an out of breath man came trying to tell us something in half Russian and half his own tongue. The only thing that we did understand was, that we should pack up our things in a hurry and be ready, because any minute a cart will come to collect us back to the port! We were stunned! Nevertheless, we did what he said.

Again, exactly the same cortege, going back to the same barges!

Before embarkation they gave us bread and some dry rations for five days, which was to be the duration of our journey. I do not remember what the dry rations consisted of but I doubt if tinned food was available for civilians. We took the same places in the holds of the same barges, one could say, still warm after we left them three days before, among the same people as before, and everything seemed as if we have never left the barges.

After some time of waiting, we were off. Our barge was the first in line. The towing tug was about 30 metres in front of us, and more or less the same distance behind us was the next barge, and then the third one. This time we were sailing upriver, against the current. On the bow of the tug was a man with a long pole, checking from time to time the depths of the riverbed. The river by itself resembled a rather wide flooded plane, not a river flowing between its banks. Despite this, the current was very strong and fast. The water was completely opaque and its colour muddy brown.

It was well into November and though during the day was still nice, at night was quite chilly. Outside was blowing strong northerly wind. A sloppy and very narrow deck without railings was often covered with icy patches making the walk to the toilet extremely dangerous. Not surprisingly, there were already casualties. On two occasions I saw a man falling overboard, hopelessly shouting for help, he disappeared from our view in only few seconds, being carried away by the fast current. Nothing could be done to save him. By the time we could alert someone on the tug, (by shouting only - there was no other ways of communication) the victim was already several hundred yards down the river. Even if he could swim, the strong current plus the speed of the tug moving in opposite direction, made any attempts of rescue impossible. Once or twice the tug tried to, but by the time the convoy stopped, it was much, much too late! Besides, it was not an easy operation to stop a tug with three barges in the middle of a very fast flowing river, and the human life was very cheap then…

During the 2-nd night we were woken by a strange noise. It looked, as someone outside was banging with a hammer into a steel side of our barge. The frequency of the banging was increasing. We were in a panic, suspecting that the barge was breaking apart, until someone climbed up and said, that the river is full of...ice floats! The noise was of impact with the ice, amplified by the resonance of the large hold's cavity, and could only be compared to noise of riveting a hull in a shipyard.

It was impossible to get back to sleep. Full of bad premonitions we spent the rest of the night unable even to talk.

Outside, the temperature dropped to below zero. The treacherous "expeditions" to the loo or to the bow, where there was enough room to light fires and cook food, now became even more dangerous. The whole barge was covered by ice, all passage-ways were now so slippery that walking on them was almost a suicide. Despite this, people had to use the toilet or keep moving for various reasons. Very unfortunately, there were sad results! Several more people perished in those muddy, ice cold waters of Amu-Darya. During the day, at least someone, just for the record, saw them falling overboard, but at night there were no witnesses, no one even noticed when they perished!

More than four days passed by and we were still sailing. It was bitterly cold. Some people could not withstand the low temperatures and did not survive the night, their neighbours were finding them dead in the morning. Their shoes, if they had any, or their clothes, quickly disappeared from the corpse. At least they were of some benefit to other people, helping them to survive another bitterly cold night.

Some desperate hungry and frozen started tearing every non-essential wooden parts of the barge, to use as firewood. More joined them soon. First to go (and quickly chopped to pieces) was the loo, then gradually disappeared the wooden grates from the bottom of the hold, then the skirting boards from the wheelhouse and when even this was not enough, the whole lot became dismantled completely two days later!

These were not acts of vandalism, this was a fight for survival. In the situation, when food rations were out, when people were hungry, without proper clothing, dying of cold and exhaustion, the least they could have was a fire on which they could cook some grouts or even boil some water and pour a little warmth into their empty stomachs. Anyway, the Russian staff and the NKVD did nothing to stop this.

After 7 days on the barge (or perhaps longer? -I cannot remember exactly how many days passed since we left Kungrad) I noticed that something was not quite the same with the tug. The man on the bow was now checking the depth non-stop, all the time shouting something to the pilot. The tug was moving forward very slowly and often changing course. Then, after a while it came to a halt.

Immediately the current started pushing our barge towards the shore. The tug, trying to correct this, must have pulled our barge too hard because the thick steel tow snapped suddenly and with a loud whiz and with a speed of a bullet flung only feet above the barge, luckily missing people gathered there. Now our barge, unattached to the tug was giving up to the current and seconds later it was at the shore. Some men immediately used this opportunity and knowing that there is no one who can forbid them doing so, started jumping off the barge onto the bank. It was a barren land, like a desert and nothing indicated that it is inhabited, but they must have seen something because they all started running in one direction.

I did not go with them and stayed on the barge. I could not exclude the possibility, that by some silly chance the barge may somehow get off the shore and float away. The incident with Lutek and Wanda, less than three weeks before in Tashkent was still fresh in my memory and I did not want to risk being separated from my family and to be left alone in the desert.

In the meantime, steering back and forth the tug tried to throw another tow. The Russians on the tug saw what was going on, but apart from shouting they could not do much. Those ashore, dispersed and quickly we lost sight of them. Perhaps about half an hour elapsed and in the distance the men from the barge appeared running back very agitated, all with... loot! Some held chickens, others carried some sacks, planks, obviously stolen!

Moments before this, the tug's pilot managed to touch the shore. The NKVD officer jumped out with a gun in his hand, rushing towards the men and spreading his arms tried to stop them reaching the barge. He shouted orders to drop the stolen goods, then fired his gun in the air several times, but nothing could stop them. Seeing no effect, he gave up. He swore loudly, put his gun back into the holster, turned around and went back on board of the tug. And the men.? Once on the barge, they safely disappeared in the holds. (As we found out, those who run wild ashore, came across a small-holder's farm and unscrupulously plundered it. The supervising NKVD officer was later court-martialled and demoted.)

The tug's crew did attach a new tow and few hours later we were afloat again. The weather improved, the ice-floats disappeared, and after two more days we landed in a port, which seemed to be larger than all previous ones. The whole procedure of our disembarking was same as before. The same primitive gangplank, "waiting room" in the open, toilets non-existent, no possible contacts (language) with the local people, everything very similar if not exactly the same as in Farab or Kungrad.

As I learned later it was Urgench, a regional capital of a district in Uzbekistan, in fact, a large oasis between the deserts Karakum and Kyzylkum.

Uzbekistan

Why did the Russians stop just one, our, train about 300 km from the border and prevented us from reaching Persia (Iran), despite allowing all previous transports with thousands of Poles to go? Why, after stopping us, did they deport us again with dreadful results to another remote and isolated place, 600 km away from the nearest railway? And, why after only two days they changed their minds and were sending us back on a treacherous journey which brought more deaths and sufferings? Why?

I am sure, that now, historians know the exact answers but then we knew nothing; we were powerless pawns with whom the politicians played as they liked.

When on the way back we were ordered off the barges in Urgench we were absolutely stunned. From Kungrad we made it less than halfway to Farab, where we have been initially taken off the train. Now we were certain that we were going back to Farab to continue so suddenly interrupted journey less than three weeks earlier, and we still believed, that this stop-over is only a short break. Our confusion intensified with the lack of any explanation, at least from the Polish representatives who travelled with us.

Sometime later bad news went around, that the exceptional weather conditions make it impossible to travel further on the river, and therefore, for the time being we should have to stay here, at least till the spring...

Much later I read that Amu-Daria is a very difficult river for navigation. Its current caries large amount of mud, which silts up the riverbed, thus unpredictably changing the navigational course. Particularly in the winter these conditions frequently appear more acute and can completely prevent sailing of larger vessels. So, at least, there was a technical explanation for stopping us in Urgench, if that was the real and only reason we shall never know.

This part of the world, where we were, was an independent emirate till last century, when in 1870 it was conquered by the Tsar. It is a large oasis situated between two deserts: Karakum and Kyzylkum (which in Uzbek language mean: Black Sands and Red Sands).

Urgench, the present Capital of the ancient Khiva khanate is known in history since Genghis Khan (in 1220), and Tamerlane (1350) both great Mongol conquerors. All this I learned later, but even had I known about it then, when we got stuck there in November 1941, I doubt if that knowledge would have made any difference to our hopeless situation.

In the meantime, while still waiting for the next move, we got some hot soup and bread. We were told that soon we will be relocated to a nearby kolkhozes, where they will take care of us. Subdued and resigned we were ready to accept everything...

The only vehicles I saw there on the unmade and full of pot-holes roads, were large two-wheeled carts of a type shown in films depicting medieval scenes from Europe, driven by oxen or horses, occasionally by donkeys or even camels.

So, for the third time recently, we followed those carts on foot, loaded with our belongings. After several hours of a long and really tiring trek, we were introduced to our new "home". It was a house in a countryside kolkhoz near Shavat. Like all buildings here it was made off clay mixed with a straw, a flat roof serving as a storage space for the dry cotton plant bushes commonly used here as fuel, and also for the dry stems of a local maze, kept mainly as a winter fodder for the cattle.

Our "home" consisted of one room, almost exactly the same as the one in Kungrad but without mice. The rest, and biggest part of the house was inhabited by an Uzbek family with three children plus a cow and a donkey. Our room had a separate entrance door.

People of Szawat

Although our host spoke only very few words in Russian, we managed to communicate with them. They were friendly and enormously curious, especially their children but all tried to be helpful, which was very comforting and encouraging to us.

From the kolkhoz we received bedsteads with straw mattresses, some essential utensils, like a washing bowl, buckets, a cauldron-shaped cooking pot fitting the opening of the stove, one or two chairs and other useful items. There was no electricity, and candles were expensive and not always available. Commonly used were paraffin lamps, but...the paraffin although rationed was almost unobtainable. Despite this, lamps were burning in every household and same in ours! We tried to arrange our "home"- as comfortably as we could and indeed, soon it looked quite cosy.

It was November 1941. There were days with temperatures dropping below zero. The only heating was the stove which was meant only to heat the pot, whether it was just water in it or rice or anything else - still the same one pot. It was not the best kind of a heater for warming the room, the more so as we had to economise on the valuable fuel - dry twigs, which did not give much heat anyway and did not last long.

Bread oven

Within days of our arrival Lutek and I were working in a nearby tractor depot. Lutek got a job in the wages department, I worked as an apprentice mechanic in the tractor repair shop. So, we had some income. Thanks to this we were more comfortable than most of those Poles, who worked in kolkhozes and received very little wages.

About two months after we started settling down in Shavat, Lutek and I got a letter from the Polish Army Enrolment Office calling us up to the assembly point in Gusar (Tadjik SSR) about 700 km from Shavat. This was for us the second opportunity to fulfil our duty and we were proud that we too will be part of the world fighting against the Germans. On the other hand, we realised that we would be leaving Mother on her own in a remote foreign country, cut off from her relatives, among people whose strange language she did not speak, without any means for living, alone... Still, despite very mixed fillings, we were ready to depart in 2 days, as was required. The only help was that the decision did not belong to us, and we could not change it. Mother was not saying anything, knowing that it is beyond anybody's power to reverse the call up.

Following afternoon, our last day before leaving, I developed a very high fever and collapsed at work. When I regained my consciousness, I was in a hospital bed shivering from fever. Next to my bed was someone dying of highly infectious typhus. The hospital medic, in the absence of the doctor,

considered me also suffering of the same illness. I was not aware, that Lutek came late at night to say good-bye, before leaving without me with a group of others.

When the doctor came in the morning, I was much better. Dr Rosenman, whom we knew well, was also a refugee from Bielsko. He diagnosed my illness as malaria and immediately ordered me off the contagious ward. He was right, the same day I was back home well and fit. Unfortunately, it was too late to join Lutek and the party. They were already gone and far away. So, by strange fortune I again felt deeply disappointed, I imagine, contrary to Mother's feelings.

It was my first attack of malaria. Since then, they became more frequent, but I learned to recognise them before they rendered me unconscious. They usually lasted several hours only, after that and although still weak I could work.

We often thought of Lutek but gradually we got used to his absence. About two weeks past by since he left and one day, suddenly... he came back! It was a shock seeing him standing at the door, visibly tired and unwilling to talk.

Mother of course was delighted; I was rather curious. Well, in the end, he told us the whole story, a rather sad story. In his opinion, he was rejected, not because he was physically unfit; the reason was rather of a racial nature. It was a repetition of an incident at the end of August 1939, when in Sosnowiec on the eve of the War, he volunteered to join the Army and was not accepted.

Our life in Shavat returned to normal. Lutek resumed his previous job, I was working in a workshop with friendly people and doing work which I was enjoying. I was always interested in cars, motorbikes, in auto-mechanics. Here I was repairing slightly bigger engines of mostly tractors. They were used by neighbouring kolkhozes growing cotton to cultivate their fields and as such they were very important in the regional economy. I with others there, though indirectly, were considered also as valuable workers.

There was one general store (shop) near us. The commodities usually sold there were salt, salty small fish, kind of a very rough-cut tobacco and bread.

There were also always available small plaster casts of Lenin's bust and also some other things with a similar use and similar demand - I never saw anybody buying them.

From time to time the shop got a delivery of a few sacks of sugar. These were sold out within an hour, or a quantity of vodka, either in original half litre bottles or in large drums, from which it was poured into vessels brought by the clients. Things like meat or its products, milk, cheeses, vegetables, fruits etc. were not available at all. If one needed them and had enough money to pay, one had to go to the market.

The market was in a nearby town - Shavat, which was a couple of miles away and within walking distance. It was always full of local products brought by the peasants from the surrounding kolkhozes. Huge stacks of all kinds of melons, grapes, apricots, peaches, figs - all ripe and very sweet; butter was sold melted in a bottle; meat - mainly mutton, but never pork; nuts; tobacco for chewing and smoking. The market was always crowded and loud. The chewing tobacco before using had to be prepared- ground to a powder and mixed with oil and other ingredients. The sticky content ready for use was carried in small bottles, often very decorative. Smoking tobacco was different to what we used to smoke in cigarettes or pipes and it was smoked rather as a social event in water-pipes (hookah).

Do you remember the incident in Kungrad, when I suddenly encountered a witch and frighten to death ran away? It was nothing else than just someone enjoying a puff of a tobacco, smoked in a water-pipe, an implement I have never seen before.

After arrival to Shavat we renewed our correspondence with the family abroad (in countries not at war with the Soviet Union). They were trying to help us by sending us parcels (some time by very devious ways, e.g. via Persia). Two items that appeared frequently inside parcels were very useful to us. They were gauze in large squares and quinine tablets. Mother used to take them to the market and never had any difficulties selling any quantity of it. This happened to be among the local women the sought-after merchandise, not for medical reasons...They dyed the gauze yellow in a solution of quinine and used it as a material for their dresses. In return, for

the money she got, Mother could buy more needed products such as butter, fruits, vegetables or even flour. (A year later we grew our own grain and vegetables on a small plot allotted to us).

We forgot about going to Persia and adjusted our lives to the new circumstances. It did not change, that for the whole time since we were deported from Lvov, we never lost hope, that one day, after the war, we will return to Poland! Though Lutek and I never felt comfortable being unable to fight the Germans side by side with others. So, the real objective now was to survive, and to survive in a positive way, but for the time being we settled in Shavat.

The situation on the front was bothering us now less then when we were much closer to it. Probably, because we felt more secure here and also perhaps with the passing of time we got used to the news from the front. These were still not good. The Germans were progressing, although not so fast as before perhaps because of the adverse winter conditions - heavy snow, temperatures much below zero-; despite of this they made a foothold in the Caucasus, aiming for the rich oil-fields there. They captured important towns south and north of Moscow and they were dangerously close to the Russian capital itself. Disregarding this the traditional November parade on Red Square took place as usual and all the Russian top dignitaries, including Stalin, stood there and saluted the troops. According to the news, no single German plain managed to penetrate the sky above Moscow that day!

At the same time, ever more often, we heard from people we knew personally losing their loved ones killed in action; their husbands, brothers, fathers... It is different if you read about it in a newspaper or someone tells you, and definitely different, when one day you see your neighbour receiving an official letter which she does not dare to open, already knowing its dreadful contents. She holds it in shaking hands and suddenly burst with a shrilling cry full of tears.

I have witnessed exactly this shortly after we moved from the kolkhoz to accommodation assigned to me by my employer MTS. (This was a commonly used name of all the tractor depots in the whole Soviet Union). My workmate, an electrician with whom I started my apprenticeship lived

with his young wife and two tiny children, next door to us. They were Tolya and Marusya Farafontow, very kind, always ready to help, very good neighbours. In December 1941 he was called up. Four months later, she received the news! There was another fellow, he was single, a few months after his call up he was dead. A company driver, one Bakhtyasow, was luckier, he only lost his leg. In a short time, so many men were called up, that only very few of us were left working in the depot. And those left were mainly older or had special exception from the authorities. I, as a Pole, was not eligible to serve in the Red Army and the Polish Army still not a fully functioning organisation did not need me so far. So, I became an "important" tractor specialist, whose task was to keep a fleet of about 50 tractors working and this was recognised by the local authority, and they obtained an exception for me too.

Since we moved to the new accommodations inside the MTS compound, our living conditions improved. We had better cooking stove, a table, some chairs, all very relevant things then, but above all, we had neighbours here we could talk to. We did not feel so isolated now as we were in kolkhoz before.

In the compound lived quite a number of families whose members worked for MTS. The local employees lived in their own homes, away from here. Here rather were, either Soviet citizens, who settled here years earlier, or refugees from Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union, who arrived quite recently. They all spoke Russian. Also, there were two Polish families, who came to Shavat at the same time us we did.

One of our neighbours I have mentioned earlier were the Farafontow. A very happy and cordial family. He, a tractor electrician, had been called up to the Army. In a matter of weeks, he was killed and she became a widow like hundreds of thousands of others. They had two little children, who surely, in very short time would forget their father.

Our other Russian neighbours were not so young, a childless couple, the Toptas -kind, warm, ready to help others. He was a company van driver, who took Zygmunt Brodowski - then about ten years old boy - as his "assistant", doing so rather more to help Zygmunt than the other way around. So, he shared with Zygmunt his teas, snacks, probably even giving

him pocket money too. Often took him home after work for dinner prepared by Mrs. Topta. As Zygmunt was officially too young then to be employed and Wanda was the only breadwinner, the family suffered considerable hardship. The Toptas helping Zygmunt were indirectly helping them all.

My workshop in Szawat

Time was passing by without any significant changes. Since we moved quarters, we had a kind of a radio at home. In fact, it was just a loudspeaker wired to the town broadcasting centre, a kind of a tannoy. But although we could not tune in to what we liked, we still had daily news and some music as well. Of course, the news was censored, but at least we could deduce the situation on the Front and psychologically we felt not so completely cut off from the world.

Germans were halted at the gates of Moscow but were still progressing elsewhere. In the South they came to the Volga River and were in the Caucasus; in the North, despite the Russian counterattack at Kursk, they surrounded Leningrad and cut off its lifelines.

Also, in North Africa Germans succeeded, and the British surrendered an important fort Tobruk. Relevant news came from Far-East, where the Japanese attacked and sunk the whole of the American fleet in Pearl Harbour, thus forcing America to join the War.

But the most terrifying and disturbing were relations describing the fate of Jews in territories captured by Germans. To accelerate extermination of Jews, they invented a method of killing them in air-tight lorries by monoxide gas from exhaust pipes. Then there was the horrifying news that reached us about Baby-Yar near Kiev, where they massacred 30,000 Jews! And... we had close relatives in Poland. Mother's father, sisters, brothers, cousins... What has happened to them, are they still alive, do they suffer?

Well, life went on! Despite everything I went to the park on Sundays, met Polish and Russian friends, went to the cinema in the open air (with a constantly breaking down generator, and so noisy that you could hardly hear anything apart the engine). Went to dances to the accompaniment of a gramophone, another words, we all lived there trying to enjoy ourselves, though were absolutely convinced that one day we will return to Poland, to normal life, to civilisation. But...who will we meet there then; this was a question we were afraid even to speculate on.

In the meantime, against Mother's will Lutek got married to a Polish girl Irena and moved out to their new home not far away from us. Our relations were not so close anymore.

I was quite happy with my work. I was working with a small team repairing and maintaining about 80 tractors. These tractors were on hire from MTS to kolkhozes to cultivate cotton plantations. The tractor-drivers, men and women, quite often had to come to us for help. Quickly, we befriended many of them.

In gratitude, the kolkhozes would invite us to their orchards, where not only we could eat rare and splendid fruits without any restrictions, but also, we were allowed to take home as much as we could carry.

My workmates were: an Uzbek - blacksmith; a Korean - traction-engine operator; a Kazakh - turner; a Ukrainian - mechanic; a Tatar sheet-metal specialist, and a few others of mixed nationalities; all were young and full of life, except for the blacksmith, who was an old man of few words. We and our supervisors got on very well together, and the general atmosphere in our workshop was really good.

I remember an incident, when one morning the Director of the MTS came to the workshop, called me to the supervisor's office and said in an apologetic form, that I am called for 8 p.m. to the local NKVD commandant. He was looking very embarrassed telling me this. Immediately I was surrounded by others and everybody seemed to be very sorry for me. They had asked me in fear, where I was yesterday, who was I talking to recently, whether I have said something which perhaps I should not have... I saw in them an expression of a real sympathy.

I must confess, that initially I did not think of it as anything serious, but after all their anxiety, I too became quite puzzled and worried. I could not work properly for the rest of the day; I was too nervous. Anyway, just before 8 p.m. I was there, at the NKVD HQ. The officer on duty, in not too friendly manner, checked my name and showed me to a waiting room. There was no electricity and the whole interior was gloomy and dark. I waited and waited and after an hour I was led to a large room. The only light came from a paraffin lamp on the desk of the officer. He too checked my name and asked some more questions. I was answering with a crackling voice and shaking body. Then he asked me if I am a mechanic, which I confirmed.

In the end he said - this time in a rather more normal manner - that they have problem, because their only typewriter was broken; one of the levers to which the printing letter is fixed has cracked and fallen off! They have no other typewriters, and the repair was very urgent and important. He wanted me to fix it immediately!

Of course, I could not do it! I was a tractor mechanic; I did not have any tools nor spare parts for typewriters. I did not know how to give him my negative answer not making him too angry... I tried to explain to him, but he interrupted me and swearing said that they should not call me a ..... mechanic if I cannot mend even a stupid typewriter... He told me to go.

Next day everybody at work was really glad to see me back, some must have had doubts to see me again so soon...but, when I said the reason of my call up, this resulted in various comments, which in any case should not be heard by the NKVD officer! Anyway, it was a lesson for me, a new first hand real frightful experience, but shortly it became a good joke only.

A few months later I had another close encounter with the almighty authorities. It was almost 10 p.m. - quite late for me. I was rather ready to go to bed, when there was knocking on the door. A Red Army private soldier was at the door. After checking my name, he said that he has an order to bring me immediately to the commanding officer of the town's military station - an equivalent of a recruitment centre.

He waited outside a few minutes until I, very puzzled and nervous, was ready to go with him. Inside the Station I met the other mechanic from MTS - already there. Soon we were shown to the office. The officer was scratching his head, not knowing how to explain this urgent call. In the end we understood his problem:

He was tasked with sending of eight young conscripts to the Red Army, for the first time since the war started!

According to the regulations, his Office must fulfil certain proceedings before the conscripts may depart. One of these was to issue them with an appropriate certificate from the Sanitary Inspector that they passed the cleanliness test. To do this he needed receipts from the local bathhouse that they bathed.

It would have been a very simple formality if not for the fact that the bath was closed a few years before because there was no demand for it. The peasants from kolkhozes did not have the need of using a communal bath and the townsfolk managed well without it also.

So, his request to us was to restore the bathhouse to working order enabling it to perform duties demanded by the Motherland. And we were given twelve hours to inspect the installations, to repair it if need be and to put it into service. The faith of the war effort depends on us now!

The bath was rather a primitive sauna. The whole installation was limited to one old barrel (the kind used for paraffin) standing on a grate for heating the water in it and a similar barrel on the floor for cold water. Beside it was a pile of stones, which when heated on the fire and tossed into the water made the room steamy. The problem was that both barrels were rusty and full of holes and could not contain water. The metal was so badly corroded that it was impossible to weld it. So, the whole place was dead.

New barrels were unavailable in such a short time. Repair without replacing the barrels was out of question. We should go back to the Lieutenant and tell him that we cannot do it.

But we decided differently... We told the Lieutenant, that everything will be fine. We asked him to send the girl with the forms and a rubber-stamp to the bathhouse at 10 a.m. and send those unfortunate boys soon after. He was immensely relieved and full of admiration for us.

In the meantime, instead of starting our "mission impossible", we went home! Next morning, we arrived almost simultaneously with the girl, who was terrified seeing that there is no fire under the barrel, that the room is cold (it was late autumn) and that there is no sign of the bath working. At this moment the poor conscripts arrived too, none of them speaking Russian, still in a deep shock from taking them away from their homes, all frighten to death from not knowing what is awaiting them.

My friend and I, trying to look friendly and calm asked them to get undressed and to step inside and sit on the bench. Then we took a bucket of cold water and splashed it on them, once from one side and once from the other. They were shivering from cold but happy that this is the end of their tortures.

The girl, sitting all the time in the next room was absolutely flabbergasted by what we were doing. When, after we finished, we told her to give them a rubber-stamped piece of a paper, that they all underwent a bath, her eyes doubled in size but without a word she did what she was told.

We returned to the Recruitment Officer reporting our "mission accomplished". He did not ask too much, preferring not to know the details. He looked satisfied and as a kind of appreciation reached for his notebook and ordered a pair of brand-new boots for each of us.

I and my Mother, Lutek with Irena, and many other Polish families, each with its own stories, were staying in Shavat till September 1944. At that time the political situation with the Polish Authorities changed. Soviet Union's relations with Polish Government in London worsened soon after the Polish Army that originated in Buzuluk left Soviet Union. Instead, they recognised new Polish Socialist Authorities in Moscow and a new Polish Popular Army

was created. From the letters from my friends in Krasnoyarski Kray I learnt that they, (both from Sosnowiec and like myself, deported from Lvov), volunteered to this new Polish Army. I was very jealous when I learnt of their enrolment.

The situation at the Front also changed radically. The fortune turned. Now the Red Army was on the offensive. Germans were in full retreat, with the loss of many hundreds of thousands of lives. At Stalingrad alone 300,000 Germans were taken prisoner. The Red Army was steadily pushing westwards and was close to Poland's old borders. In the West too the Germans were losing ground. The end of the horrible war was close!

Despite the previous decision of my exception from the Army I applied again, this time to the new Polish leader Wanda Wasilewska, but was refused on the grounds that I am more needed at work! And that was my last attempt at trying to join the Army.

Two of my friends became pilots. One of them, Olek Broch was shot down over Baltic Sea, the other one, Kazik Rutenberg was in the Forces till the end of the War and then demobilised as a Flight Lieutenant, returned to Lodz, graduated there and later emigrated to Israel. (I am still in touch with him.)

In August 1944 all Poles in Shavat Region were notified that within a few weeks we will be leaving, not quite to Poland as it has not been completely liberated by the Red Army, but somewhere closer - to Ukraine. One September day it did happen. We started our long journey back home...

Ukraine

After another routine journey, by cart to the nearest port, then from there by the familiar barge, sailing down the river to Kungrad on the south cost of the Aral Sea, we crossed the Sea and two days later finally disembarked in the port of Aralsk, on the northern coast. There, in order to complete our journey to yet undisclosed destination, we were to change from the barge to a train.

Waiting for the train in Aralsk was no different to all previous occasions. About 300 people with all their belongings, bivouacking in the open for several days. It was nothing new to us. Luckily the weather was kind, this time we had enough food for the journey, drinking water was available, making small fires for cooking was not a problem too and above all, we were on our way back home - well, almost back home. So, we had no reason to complain and were in rather good spirits.

Some distance from us at another sidings, was also a large group of "train" people like us, whose identity I could not recognise. They looked rather like Cossacks; they wore mainly rough brownish-grey cloaks and did not speak Russian to each other. Being curious I approached them and they told me, that they were Chechens and for unknown to them reason, Stalin ordered their deportation from the Caucasus. Later I was told that this was his (Stalin's) retaliation for their co-operation with the Germans during their push towards the Caspian Sea oil resources.

This reminded me, that in Shavat there was a large group of Koreans. They too, were deported from the Vladivostok region in the Far East by Stalin's regime. They were displaced for being suspected of not being fully trustworthy Soviet citizens of Korean origin, who happened to live in a region bordering with independent Korea, and who happened to have relatives on the other side of the border. So, in Stalin's mind it was safer for the whole of the Soviet Union, with its 200 million population, if a few thousands Korean peasants were resettled 5,000 miles further away from their families!

But... back to Aralsk. Not far away from where we were "camping" were large mounds of crude salt. They were similar to those mounds of salt stored by the traffic departments in every country, ready to be spread on the roads

in case of icy conditions, only much larger. Here they did look like belonging to anyone...they were not fenced off, they were not guarded, there was not even a warning sign. But despite everything, this salt must have constituted quite valuable merchandise, because this place was swarming with people freely helping themselves to sacksfuls - simply stealing.

Listening to advice of fellow travellers, who said, that in Ukraine, there is an acute shortage of salt (how did they know that?) I too filled a large wooden crate with at least 60 kilos of it. No more than two or three days later I regretted that I did not take much more! Every time our train got to a stop, immediately it was surrounded by local people asking, if we have salt for sale. I could have sold any quantity if I wanted to. This episode reminded me of a conversation between an old Cossack and his young son, a communist activist during Russian Revolution. (described by M. Sholokhov in his "And Quiet Flows the Don"). This father asked him to explain, how it is, that as soon the communists took over, immediate result is a shortage of salt? And that was in 1917!

After waiting for several days in Aralsk, finally we boarded a train (also familiar) and began the next stage of our journey West.

I still remembered some names of railway stations passing by from our previous journey in the opposite direction, but once we came to the European part of Soviet Union, and were approaching the river Volga, many of those stations were now more than just names. They were vivid memorials of recent bloody battlefields. Almost behind every town's name was a heroic tale of not so distant history. But I missed the most important monument: Stalingrad… Whether it was, because we passed it at night, or perhaps, we made a detour because of the total destruction of bridges on the River, I do not know.

Day or two later we came to a stop at the Bolshoi Tokmak station. This time, instead of horse pulled carts, waiting to take us to a new location were modern, ex-military lorries, part of American help to Russia.

First time since our deportation from Lwów, we were not travelling together with the Brodowski Family. Several months earlier, Wanda met one Mietek Swisłocki in Szawat, fell in love with him, got married shortly before our

departure and as he was on assignment there (on behalf of the Polish Army), the whole family stayed behind. They returned to Poland later.

Also, Lutek with Irena were travelling separately in a different carriage, though on the same train as us. Lutek, without Mother's approval, was already married to Irena and because of this, the relations between them and Mother were very strained. They were not speaking to each other.

Consequently, after arrival to Bolshoi Tokmak, Mother and I and Lutek with Irena, were allocated separate accommodations, though not far from each other, both on the outskirts of the town.

Where exactly on the map was Bolshoi Tokmak, I did not have a clue then. Because of the War all maps were secret and not available to the public. At the Railway Stations timetables were non-existent and the destination of a stopping train was also unknown. People, when asked, didn't know or avoided giving answers. So, although I knew that we were in Zaporozhe District, (postal address) in the very heart of Ukraine, I could not place it on the map.

Much later I realised how close we were from the shores of the Black Sea and such attractive places as beautiful Crimea or famous Odessa. Anyway, it would not have helped, as we would not dream then of any sight-seeing trips!

In Bolshoi Tokmak Mother and I were given a room in a typical Ukrainian cottage. A one storey thatched house of which one half was a quite primitive living quarter with uneven pugging clay floor - a kitchen and 2 rooms (one occupied by us) and the other half a byre (cow shed) combined with a barn.

The house belonged to an old woman, who lived there with her daughter-in-law and her teenage granddaughter. They were still mourning the death of their son, husband and father, killed not long ago on the front.

They kept a cow and a few chickens. Milk and eggs sold by the old woman on the market were their main source of income. Although now they increased the income by our rent, I did not feel comfortable in their presence. I always had the feelings, that looking at me they were asking themselves, why it had to be their Ivan and not me, or someone else? So,

somehow feeling guilty I tried to justify my existence and be as much help to them as I could.

Apart from the rationed bread sold in shops, food was scarce and available only at the market. There it was possible to buy some locally grown products directly from the peasants. That large crate of salt I brought from Aralsk appeared to be a quite useful merchandise. For many months, any time I or Mother went to the market, we used to barter it for tobacco, potatoes or other vegetables as well as crude sunflower oil, the only fat available substituting butter or lard.

Shortly after arrival to Bolshoi Tokmak I was given a job as a locksmith or rather a metal worker in a municipal multi-craft workshop. One of very few advantages of my job was, that thanks to work done in some shops I made a few connections which helped me to purchase daily rations of bread more regularly and without queuing and also occasionally a kilo or two of flour or other rarities.

It was a very cold winter in 1944/1945, and the shortages of food were very acute. The Red Army was for some time in steady advance and the retreating Germans were burning and destroying everything behind them. People were close to starvation, homes were cold because there was nothing to burn in the stoves, in general, it was very difficult time to live.

Very often I went to work so hungry that I stole and ate bits of sunflower oilcake meant for the cattle. But I also remember one funnier episode: Vanya, my fellow worker working at the bench next to me was a Gypsy who for years permanently lived with his family in Bolshoi Tokmak. He used to bring to work large pieces of home-made cake for lunch. Any time I watched him eating this cake, I imagined and, in my mind, tasted the cake my Mother used to bake every Sunday - sweet, full of raisins…It made my mouth water! He must have noticed my jealous look because one morning he asked me with a disguised smile, if I wanted some of his cake. Not waiting for an answer, he broke a large portion of his cake. I grabbed it and bit a much larger piece than I should …and immediately almost choked myself. I chewed it and chewed it unable to swallow. I must have had a very stupid face, because he was laughing loudly at me.

What happen was that the cake only superficially resembled Mother's cake. The taste of it was completely different. It was made of corn grits, with no eggs, no sugar, no spices. It was dry and tasted almost like the oilcake.

After a while, when in the end I managed to swallow it with the help of a gulp of a black tea, we both could not stop laughing. He knew well, what kind of cake I had in mind. In better days they too used to make same cakes as my Mother did…

At work I met some Russians released from the Army. Misha, an ex-mariner, heavily wounded and still with embedded splinters in his brain, otherwise a very gentle giant, from time to time had moments in which was better to keep away from him.

One bitterly cold December evening I was returning home. In the central point of the town was a small green, covered in deep snow. In the middle of it stood a single large old chestnut tree. Passing by I noticed a man with an axe trying to chop down this magnificent tree. Coming closer I recognised Misha! He did not hear my steps dampened down by the snow. I asked him what the hell he was doing? It was very dangerous thing, but it was too late now! And he, as if nothing happened, turned to me and unexpectedly, with a quiet voice said that he has nothing to put into his ***** stove and continued chopping. At this moment I spotted a Militiamen coming. I did not wait to see the further development and almost run home. Next day he did not come to work and I have not seen him anymore…

The other Russian, although in fact he was a Ukrainian, (I call them all "Russians", in the same way as foreigners call all inhabitants of United Kingdom "Englishman" no matter whether he was Scott, Welshman, Irish or anybody else living in this country) was one of those hundreds of thousands of Red Army men captured by the Germans, kept in a P.O.W., liberated during recent Russian offensive, and later closely interrogated by the NKVD. They were all suspected that they surrendered willingly, with no resistance! He too one day disappeared and never turned up at work.

By the beginning of 1945 most of Poland was already liberated from the Germans. The end of the War was in the air. Every day a news bulletin announced new towns have been freed from the Germans. Now the fighting was on German soil. The liberated people in Poland and everywhere else

started rebuilding their lives. Separated families were trying to find their dear ones, hoping that they are still alive. Indeed, of those missing, many were still alive, some were in concentration camps, some deported, some in the Army and some others just in faraway countries. But…millions did not survive; it was not known even how they perished or where and when?

Earlier I mentioned about displaced Chechens and Koreans. Now, and it was middle of 1945, I met some Ukrainians, sharing the same fate…

One morning I came to work and in the spacious yard of our workshops there were three large and solidly built wagons. Each with a pair of a well-kept horses - not common in those days - attended by several men, all dressed much better than most of us. As I overheard them talking in a language sounding more Polish than Ukrainian, I approached them and we started talking. They were reluctant to tell me their story, they did not trust me, but to me it was enough to identify who they were and what they were doing here. They were Ruthenians, an ethnic minority, living mainly in the south-east of Poland, and demanding independence. Highly anti-Polish and anti- Semitic. They saw the Germans as their allay in their fight for freedom and when they invaded Poland co-operated with them. Now, when the Germans retreated, the Russians took "care of them and appreciated their stand accordingly". As a not trustful element, the NKVD preferred to have them dispersed and have them closer. So many of them were deported and some of them resettled in the kolkhozes in this region. I have not seen them since and surely was not keen to do so.

For the whole lengths of the War, we successfully tried to be in touch with any accessible relatives or friends abroad, thanks to whom the rest of our family knew of our whereabouts. If it was not the family in USA, it was someone in England; with Szymek (Mother's brother in then Palestine) she exchanged correspondence via address in Persia; after liberating Poland we came back to some old contacts in Radom…

Anyway, one day we got a letter from Mother's other brother, uncle Samek. We have not heard of him since the German invasion of Soviet Union. It appeared that when the Germans took Węgrów in 1941, he fled, joined the partisans and fought with them till the liberation. Now he was in Poland as

a Doctor with the Polish Army and wanted to visit us in Bolshoi Tokmak as soon as possible!

It was enormous joy to see him alive and well a few weeks later! From him we learned that also two of Mother's sisters - Mania and Edzia are also alive, they miraculously survived Nazi's occupation. Unfortunately, Mother's third brother Abram, her Father and many other close relatives had perished in the Holocaust. The full picture of the horror of the extermination camps, like Auschwitz, Majdanek, ghettos, and all highly sophisticated methods of mass killings of Jews by the Nazis were yet to be fully disclosed to the public at large!

Discovering that at least part of the family is alive, we could hardly wait to return to Poland. Now we found a real purpose to return and start a new life. Going back was no more an abstract.

In September 1945 Irena (Lutek's wife) gave birth to a girl, Aleksandra - Oleńka for short. A few weeks later the baby developed a painful skin infection. As Lutek was at work and Irena could not take the child everywhere with her we were often asked by Irena to look after the little girl. She was few months old, covered from head to foot with painful blisters and the only available then treatment, applied by visiting us everyday friend Doctor Rosenman (from Bielsko), was to prick the blisters, disinfect them individually with some antiseptics and bandage the whole body. Not surprisingly the unfortunate baby was crying most of the time. The worst moments for me were when I had been left alone with the crying child.

No methods known to me of calming the baby worked. I tried hugging her, cuddling, swinging, rocking - all without slightest result.

As once being alone with her crying her lungs out, and completely helpless, not knowing what else I could do with this poor child, I started improvising lullabies, but I did not know any of the baby songs! So, I just started singing some opera arias. In this moment I realised, that I have an old gramophone. I wound it up, put a single record on it and started playing!

Oleńka looked and listened attentively to the music and… stopped crying! A miracle! Since then, I tried my gramophone invention many times as soon she started crying, it always worked. I should add perhaps that this was

lively music from Carmen and…the only record I had! It is so deeply engraved in my memory, that even now after 55 years, every time I hear this piece of music, I am immediately transferred to that cottage in Bolshoi Tokmak and visualise those moments.

Just as the rumours of the repatriation to Poland became the most frequent subject of conversation among us, I was suddenly called to the NKVD. I was convinced that this is the start of the formalities connected with our return, the more so, because they demanded all my documents.

I have no exact recollection of what documents I had on me then, because those received, when freeing us from the Madary lager and stating that I was a Polish citizen, had been taken away by the Poles in Buzuluk some time ago. I do not remember, who and when gave us other documents but I am certain, that nowhere in any of the new documents was mentioned, that we were Soviet subjects. We were always and everywhere treated as Poles.

That evening - NKVD never worked during the day - this gloomy officer took all my papers and without any explanations handed me back a Soviet Passport! I was absolutely stunned. I cannot remember, if he congratulated me of the privilege of becoming a new Soviet Citizen, but for certain I did not express any thanks for this distinction, I could not hear anything, I could not say anything. I left the building and even do not know how I got home! Only minutes before I did not think that my visit there could take such a turn!

Although I realised that my new status may hinder awaited repatriation to Poland, I did not think, that it could prevent it completely. Still, I did not feel at ease with the Soviet Passport in my pocket. But when I found out that the same happened also to other Poles, I stopped worrying and simply treated this as just another political move. In fact, I was right, a few month later, in the same NKVD building, they took my Passport back and instead gave a document which allowed me (together with many others) to return to Poland.

Only two years ago, after reading a real story written by someone deported like myself to Russia (Boleslaw Gleichgewicht -*Polish title" Widziane z Oddali"*) I realised, how close in 1945 I was from being barred from returning

to Poland. His Polish documents too were replaced with a Soviet Passport by the NKVD. As a result of this, he as a Soviet Citizen and the likes of him, were stuck in Russia for further 10 years. Only after prolonged efforts he was allowed to return in…1956!

But I and the ones I knew, were lucky.

Return to Poland

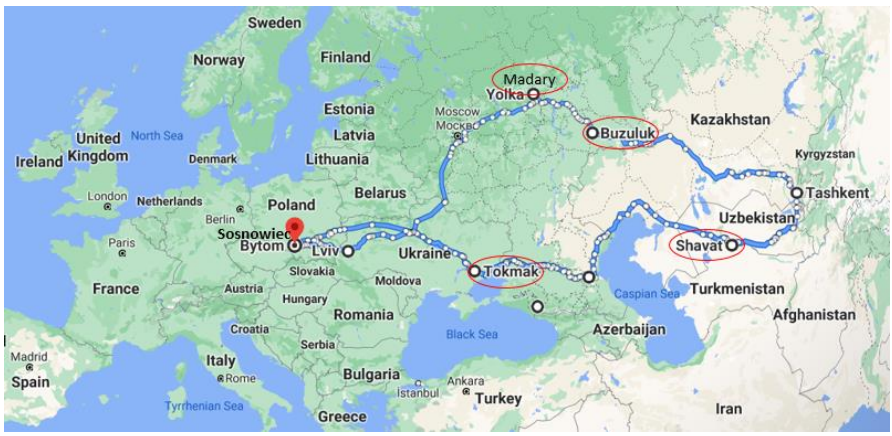
One day, Lutek, who was one of the leaders in a local Związek Patriotów Polskich (Polish Patriots Union), an organisation created by the Polish Communist Government in Moscow in 1942/3 to represent interests of all Poles who still remained in the Soviet Union after the exodus of General Anders' Army, brought home news of our planned repatriation – it was to happen very soon.

On the day of our departure, we were all very elated while awaiting the big moment on a platform of Bolshoi Tokmak railway station. Six and a half years since leaving my home in Sosnowiec I was going back. I knew that my home which I left then full of my toys, my books and all my childhood memories is not "my" home anymore and that someone else lives there now and it is their home but… So where will I live?

For a moment my mind went back to Sosnowiec 1939 - our flat in Malachowskiego Street – early morning of 1 July 1939. I am wearing my scout uniform, my rucksack with a rolled-up blanket around it, a canteen and a water bottle dangling – I am ready to depart for a three-week camp in Skawa. I am going with friends from a youth organisation Hanoar Hacjoni. I am saying goodbye to my parents. I was 16 and it was the last time I saw our family home. Leaving the flat at that time I did not imagine that a few weeks later my mother, father and the oldest brother, each at a different moment a few days apart, concerned at the German advance, will be running away from Sosnowiec and leaving our large, comfortable, fully furnished apartment abandoned. Mother left first taking with her some of the most necessary possessions in a few suitcases and went to her family in Radom. A few days later my father departed for Warsaw to pick me up from my summer camp and my oldest brother left last. He left on the second day

of the war when the German troops were only a few kilometres away – he closed the door behind him …

And now I was about to return but I had no interest in visiting our old flat in Sosnowiec – I didn't know or trust how I would react if I saw it or if I came across an old object or some reminder of our life there. The people who lived there now knew nothing of its history and would have moved in recently, after the previous German occupants run away following the retreating German army.



The journey back to Poland, as it did not leave anything particular in my memory; it must have been either uneventful or maybe it was that I was so completely overcome by excitement. All I know is that we travelled by the very familiar to us Soviet mass transport – an "eszalon" – a train made up of goods wagons (otherwise used for transportation of animals) with primitive benches and a fixed pipe that acted as a toilet. It was very familiar to us – the same kind of train, the same carriages, more or less the same people as so many times before. But there was one tremendous difference. Till then the Soviet regime treated us as an inconvenient Polish war refugees, who while deprived of their freedom of movement, were the USSR's responsibility. They moved us from place to place at will. Consequently, choosing a place to live, where to work and how to get there was their problem, not ours. We were passive and our only worry was, how best to survive in the given circumstances. And now it was down to us!

It had been arranged with my uncle Samek, that we would go straight to Bytom and where my aunts, Edzia and Mania were anxiously awaiting our arrival.

We travelled for several days, many hours each day all the way from Bolshoi Tokmak in Ukraine to Krakow. In Krakow we changed to our first passenger train to Katowice and finally after another change to our destination, Bytom. We knew that from the moment we cross the Polish border, we will be on our own - in completely new circumstances, trying to rebuild our lives from the very beginning again!

When I was leaving Sosnowiec in 1939, Bytom was a German town, called Beuthen, some 15 kilometres from Sosnowiec, and it lay just the other side of the border. After the war the border was shifted several hundred kilometres west and Bytom became a Polish town, far away from the country's borders.

Samek was a doctor who before the war lived and practiced medicine from his surgery in Węgrów (a 100 or so kilometres east of Warsaw) and then moved to Maniewicz (Manevychi) near Rownego (Rivne?), then Poland and now Ukraine, just before the start of the war between Germany and Russia in 1941. As the Germans advanced and took Maniewicz he escaped and joined the partisans. Several years later his partisan group, by then part of the Red Army, begun to move west. My two aunts, my mother's sisters, escaped the Warsaw ghetto and survived the war, each under different circumstances and on false Aryan papers (i.e. not identifying them as Jews). Following the end of the war Samek found them and together they decided to settle in Bytom, where they were allocated two flats previously lived in by Germans. They began to work, rebuild their lives and create a new future. Soon after we managed to make contact with them and so when the time came, we knew where to aim for.

Finally, in the late evening of 15 February 1946, tired but happy, excited, nervous and full of thoughts, also, very cold and hungry, we stepped off the train in Bytom, where Samek was waiting for us.

After such a long time in a completely different world and conditions, the return to civilisation – to a large town with trams, streetlamps, multi-story

houses, flats with bathrooms, with gas in the kitchen, with telephones, etc. - was a real shock.

Everything was strange to me and I didn't know anyone in Bytom. I lived with my mother at my aunt's flat – I was safe, had a roof over my head, I was fed, and I did not concern myself with whether the help we were getting from the State Repatriation Office (Państwowy Urząd Repatriacyjny, PUR) was sufficient to live on. I existed in some strange world, without any responsibilities, without a job, without any familiar faces and I could not find myself in these new surroundings. I had a place to sleep, I got meals, clean sheets and reasonable clothes – really everything that was necessary to exist. But I felt as if I was suspended in a vacuum.

I was then 23 years old, but that was only my chronological age. In fact, my readiness to start a normal, independent life, as might be expected from a young man of that age, was no different from that when 6 ½ years earlier I was going on camping holiday age 16. These 6 ½ years were lost to me, they were missing, as were missing most of my friends, many members of my Family who perished, lost schooldays, and a large and possibly the best part of my childhood. The 6 ½ years were an irrevocable gap in my life.

I lacked initiative and had no idea what to do next. For all these years someone else made decisions for me; where I am to be tomorrow, what I am to do, where to sleep and in which canteen to obtain food. All those around me were in the same situation. Life revolved around surviving in the present and later…? Later everything will be different, better… But when later came I became helpless.

The aunt we lived with had a university degree and up to the start of the war was a high school teacher in Warsaw and my uncle was a doctor. Both were convinced that I should continue my education and achieve some further educational certification. Mother's other two sons i.e. my brothers, Lutek and Adam, already had university degrees and so I too should not end with my unfinished lower school certificates (which had I not been interrupted by the war would have been equivalent to something like an English GCSEs) as it was thought that without higher education I shall end up being nothing! I really felt the great pressure they put on me. I understood that I should somehow restart my education that was

interrupted over 6 years previously and aim to at least complete the first level (GCSE). I would have liked to go to university, but a pre-requisite was "matura" (A'levels or Bacheloriat). No one however new better than I what huge gaps I had in maths or physics. I really doubted that I could catch up the three years in a matter of a few months which was what everyone tried to convince me of – in the meantime they were telling me that with my talent anything was possible. I knew that this would not be so simple and I was afraid that I will not succeed, but I was not be able to resist the pressure – so I gave in.

My other aunt, who settled back in her native Radom immediately joined the project to find a school for me. Thanks to her friends in a local high school in Radom she found a place for me for four months towards the end of the academic year. It was a high school for boys. So, I had four months in which to not only learn to sit still in a classroom again, remember the long ago learned material, catch up with what the others learned during the current year and develop a routine to keep up with all the current work and preparation for exams, including concentrating during the lessons and doing homework afterwards. I stood out among the 16-year-olds in the class - being some six years older and not having anyone I knew I kept myself to myself. I had nothing in common with the others – no common interests, no local knowledge or understanding of the town which survived the war undamaged. The population, including my classmates, were very typical traditional small-town Polish Catholic folk, amongst whom I was "different" in all sorts of ways.

During the lessons I kept catching myself thinking of faraway places and I did not understand what was being taught and could not wait for the lessons to end. I would then return to the empty house of my old aunt where I was supposed to do the homework and study, study, study.

I cannot remember how long I lasted, maybe a week or two and I gave up my attempt at education and returned to Bytom, to my disappointed family – of course I too was disappointed with myself.

Very happily and with much joy and relief I unexpectedly met two of my old and close school friends. One of them, Witek Paczesniowski returned to Poland much earlier than I from forced labour in Germany. He told me that

for the past several months he had been attending the preparatory course at the Gliwice Polytechnic with an aim to start the proper undergraduate course in the following academic year. He was trying to persuade me to do the same.

The other friend, Kazik Rutenberg who was demobilised from the Polish air force in the Soviet Union was also attending a preparatory year at Łódź Polytechnic. Their advantage over me was that both were much better students than I and not having "skipped" a year already achieved the "GCSEs" prior to the start of the war – I was a year behind. I decided to try to follow in their footsteps and despite the fact that the course had already been going for a few months I joined the prep year in Gliwice – I had a small hope that I might somehow manage to catch up. I may have even succeeded if not for the many temptations and opportunities to have fun all around, which I could not resist.

At the Polytechnic I finally met people of my age group and whose education was interrupted similarly to mine and who were now trying to make up for the lost teenage years. Our youthful and not always most sensible ideas and energy to organise fun events never waned. We were having fun – there were jokes, we played tricks on each other, we partied – we were full of life. We lead a carefree existence and never missed an opportunity to go to a party or a student ball.

Of course, there were among us those for whom learning was easier; whether because their knowledge was more up to date, had more talent or simply took it more seriously and studied harder – none of these characteristics applied to me however. I was too weak, had too deep knowledge gaps and too much determination to make up for all the lost years in Russia… I was falling further and further behind until one day I realised that there is no point in fooling myself and those close to me and decided to end with the Polytechnic. The one major achievement was that I made lots of new friends and as a result my mental state improved greatly. At the same time, I once again found myself at point of not knowing what next?

Till then I depended on modest financial help from my family – on the basis that it was supposed to be a loan for my education. Given that my studies

came to an end I could no longer justify their generosity especially that their financial situation wasn't exactly strong and every penny counted. And so, what shall I do?

Bricha

It cannot be underestimated how much control the communist government had in the post war Poland, and in particular in the early years.

They wielded absolute power over the media and thus they were able to control what people knew and importantly prevent people from knowing anything that the government didn't want them to know. All that was published in the papers or broadcast on radio or television was censored – there was obviously no global TV or other international news sources. The very few western broadcasters that attempted to broadcast to Poland, such as the BBC or Radio Free Europe (broadcast from West Germany) were very effectively blocked by the state. As a result, there was much gossip and scraps of news were whispered in secret – some of which was even true. And there was much going on in Poland that the media did not report on at all, in particular in the early post-war years. For example, there were systematic military actions against bands of armed Ukrainian nationalists in the southeast of the country that were aiming to overthrow the communist rule – active despite the end of the war and not accepting the status quo. Common were antisemitic "excesses" (pogroms) – brutal attacks on Jewish homes, pulling Jews from train carriages and organised murders e.g. in Kielce in July 1946. Obviously, such atrocities, so soon after the holocaust, when the gas chambers and crematoria were still warm, caused much fright and concern and disgust among the Jews. Each attack, each act of antisemitism raised new fears and hot discussions – one recurring topic was emigration to Israel. (When things start happening Jews think of a safe place – Israel)

For many each new attack raised concern over the safety of their family to a point that the only logical conclusion was emigration. In our home this topic also came up from time to time. There was talk about who already applied for a passport, who was planning to and who already left and where to. And naturally whether we should go too. Very soon the news of the danger for the Jews in Poland became known in the West.

My father had a family in America and mother in Israel. Both these families insisted that at least I, as the youngest, should emigrate from Poland. I even received a personal invitation and other relevant documents from America, that were needed to apply for a USA visa – and from Israel also, where there was no need for a visa, I received many encouraging invitations including a conditional acceptance to a sea cadet school, which I must admit sounded very tempting. Given the then situation for Jews in Poland I began to lean towards a theory that Jews should really leave Poland. Despite that deep down I was not a convinced Zionist, I began to see Israel as the only sensible solution. Nevertheless, I did not see myself as one of the potential emigrants.

Just as after the long time in Russia, cut off for so many years, away from my circle, I began to find a few of the surviving old friends, thoughts of leaving did not sit well. Especially as to my great joy I managed to return to this depleted bunch; Jews, half-Jews and Christians in whose company I felt good. There was Kazik – a lieutenant airman in the 1st Battalion – Warszawa. Witek who later became a scientific worker at Gliwice Polytechnic. Jerzyk Wolf, ex- partisan, officer in the French resistance. Lesia O. an editor, Wojtek B. later a company director, Zdzisiek D. a successful chief vet and others. We knew each other well, we knew enough about each other and there was never among us any antagonism linked to race, and even less religion. Of course, at the time none of us paid any attention to such matters – girls, parties, cinema – these were much more interesting topics of conversation and they united us.

And of course, going back to conversations at home about leaving Poland, no matter where to, I realised that this would yet again involve severing all of my friendships – this time the decision however being mine to take. And this I just could not begin to imagine.

Earlier I mentioned my summer camp organised by the Zionist organisation Hanoar Hacjoni – I was definitely a part-time or a "Sunday" member. I would become active twice a year – just before a summer camp and again in the winter before a ski trip. I was never linked with their ideology but they did resolve my holiday situations including the summer camps and very attractive winter skiing trips. I also met new friends there. My contacts with them were rather rare and after the war they stopped altogether. On

our return to Bytom, I did not seek contact despite having bumped into one or two of the old members. And so, imagine my surprise when while troubled by thoughts of what to do next, having recently resigned from the Polytechnic, one of those that I met at the summer camps before the war, turned up at my home, having somehow found my address. Stranger still was that we were never close - for me he was always ideologically too serious. He began to tell me about himself and most of all about his current activities within a special organisation. I must admit that I did not listen too attentively and definitely without enthusiasm – he bored me. This changed immediately however as he came up with a specific proposition for me and I became all ears. He went on for a long time before I realised what he was trying to say. It finally turned out that he worked for a secret organisation whose aim was to smuggle groups of Jews out of Poland – those that could not emigrate legally i.e. the government would not allow to leave the country. In other words, his proposition was about illegally transporting people across borders and delivering them to a safe place in a country where they would be taken care off. Till that moment I had not heard of such an organisation, and I was taken aback by his proposition for me to join. The way he put it across to me it was clear that he had the authority to make such a proposition. He continued to paint a picture of expeditions (for extra effect he added that I would carry a revolver in my pocket) at night, crossing the mountains, leading groups of people or other methods of crossing the boarders. It all sounded very much like a secret adventure and I got very excited and agreed to his "job offer" without any doubts. It resolved my problem of not having a job and not earning and it fitted in with my idea of an exciting job. It also postponed, for some time at least, the very disturbing decision and thoughts about my own emigration.

When I turned up as agreed at the Yichud hall in Katowice my friend wasn't there, but others expected me.

History note:

The history of Jewish political parties in Eastern Europe was short, stretching as it did only from the 1880s until 1949, when what little remained of them after World War II was liquidated by the then recently established Communist regimes. Even during that brief period, experience demonstrated that their ability to change the circumstances in which the Jewish populations lived was severely limited. With the

Jewish people in the states and major historic regions of Eastern Europe only rarely exceeding 10 percent of the total population, the parties could not realistically have been expected to gain a significant share in government.

(A bit of history:
https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Parties_and_Ideologies)

After a friendly unofficial chat when we reminisced about our old friends and the war years the conversation moved on to the matter at hand. It turned out that for some unspecified reason I was not able to start my proper "job" for a month or so and in the meantime, they wanted me to take over running of a youth kibbutz in Bielsko, on a temporary basis. Traditionally a kibbutz is a type of a collective farm, typically agricultural in nature, that were set up by the early settlers in Palestine – something like a Soviet kolkhoz but functioning honestly. In this case the term referred to a temporary youth shelter, taking care of young people with no job, no means of support and awaiting an opportunity to depart for Israel. The Bielsko town authorities, fully aware of the activity, provided living accommodation but the rest, including food, etc. was to be covered by the Jewish organisations. And I was to take charge of one such establishment!

I knew that living there were young people of both sexes and that someone had already fulfilled the management role but they needed someone like me who would be able to provide a better interface to the local authorities as the existing person had difficulty in dealing with them. Initially I was terrified of the responsibility. I was aware from the pre-war days of how the summer or winter holiday camps functioned but only as a passive attendee and definitely not as someone responsible for their functioning. I was going to Bielsko with some reservations as to whether I will be able to fulfil what was expected of me. In practice everything turned out much easier and less complicated than I feared.

I found a group of some 20 people – young, happy, without demands and most of all well organised with everyone knowing their responsibilities. I felt like a figure head while they welcomed me warmly and I soon felt as one of them. My arrival didn't change anything – the daily routine and discipline were well established and remained unchanged but I felt very pleased to be surrounded by friendly and well-meaning people. I got to

know many of their war time stories – some just like me had been transported to Russia, others survived the occupation in Poland hiding or living on falsified, the so-called Aryan* papers that identified their ancestry being not Jewish, one was a partisan. Among them there was a very young girl who spend the occupation `in a convent as a young nun. She was so deeply affected by her experience that she had great trouble accepting her original identity that was being re-introduced to her. She shied away from the other happy, smiling, playful girls and could not bring herself to even look at the boys. I had many long conversations with her but I don't know if any of them helped. She was going to Israel to be reunited with the only surviving member of her family, her mother's sister – all the others had been murdered by the Germans. She awaited her departure with trepidation.

**In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, some scholars and others transformed the Aryans into a mythical "race" that they claimed was superior to other races. In Germany, the Nazis promoted this false notion that glorified the German people as members of the "Aryan race," while denigrating Jews, Black people, and Roma and Sinti (Gypsies) as "non-Aryans."*

I knew Bielsko, a handsome mountain town, from visiting it before the war. Now it was late spring or maybe early summer - it was warm and green and we had nothing to do. Everyone was awaiting a date of their departure and in the meantime we were bored. We walked around and took short excursions into the mountains. Time passed quickly and reminded me of the summer holiday camps…

After maybe two months I was called back to Katowice – my new assignment was in Szczecin (the northwest of Poland, near the German border). Deep down I hoped to remain in Lower Silesia, in the mountains, close to the Czech border as was discussed earlier, but the plans changed. Although a bit disappointed I accepted all the conditions.

I was given instructions as to where and when to go and a few days later, after making relevant preparations and following a long 12-14-hour journey by train I got there. I think it was July 1946 and I started a new chapter of my life – working for a secret organisation.

Each of the five people that I was to work with in Szczecin represented a different Zionist party. They each had been working there for quite some

time and all had their own necessary contacts. I was new and also the youngest. And on top of that, I did not understand Hebrew or Yiddish which the others spoke – as a result they had to translate all the important things for me. I asked to have the conversations in Polish when I was to be involved and they did try but the moment discussion got heated they automatically and unthinkingly switched to Yiddish – it was clearly easier for them to argue in that language.

The aim, as I already mentioned, was to take groups of Jews across the border. These people survived the war and now wanted to emigrate and to start new lives in Israel or elsewhere in the West. It was difficult however to get permission to emigrate and only very few were successful – just a handful. Emigration for most was not allowed. Many individual attempts at escaping, mostly by Poles (i.e. not Jews – I find this description very troubling as it suggests that you cannot be a Jew and a Pole at the same time…) ended tragically. This is why the World Jewish Congress wishing to help thousands who wanted to leave but could not do it legally organised other ways, some not always legal. To this end was formed a secret organisation called Bricha, also called Bericha Movement, that I now became a member of.

History note:

Bricha (Briha, "escape" or "flight"), also called the Bericha Movement, was the underground organized effort that helped Jewish Holocaust survivors escape post–World War II Europe to the British Mandate for Palestine in violation of the White Paper of 1939. It ended when Israel declared independence and annulled the White Paper.

The movement of Jewish refugees from the Displaced Persons camp in which they were held (one million persons classified as "not repatriable" remained in Germany and Austria) to Palestine was illegal on both sides, as Jews were not officially allowed to leave the countries of Central and Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union and its allies, nor were they permitted to settle in Palestine by the British.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bricha)

People, Jews, nominated by their representatives or organisations were referred to us. From the moment of arriving in Szczecin they were under

our care and protection. We waited for them at the train station, took them to their accommodation and till the moment of their transfer, which could take some time – even weeks on occasions - we provided food and other assistance as was necessary.

Often, we needed to arrange special, false papers that would "allow" them to cross the border. Our job did not end at getting them across the Polish - German border however – our couriers were responsible for escorting them all the way to a western country where they were safe – obviously received by the local representatives. Following a hand-over our couriers returned back for next groups.

The existing at the time State Repatriation Office was there to assist in repatriations of foreigners who found themselves on Polish territory, often as slave labourers brought in by the Germans or survivors of concentration camps. Polish railways ran special trains to take these people to their destinations and our organisation frequently managed to place our groups, of course with false identity, and get them out of the country in that way. To use this route of escape everyone needed documents such as relevant foreign birth certificates, school or marriage certificates or other documents that would help to establish their foreign identity. This meant however that for the duration of the transfer no one was allowed to carry their real papers or items that could identify their true identity during searches on the border. All these personal objects were to be wrapped in small parcels and handed over to us for safe carriage to the other side. The danger was that one wrong photograph could stop the whole transport. Jewellery raised particular suspicions as the survivors of concentration camps were obviously not likely to be in possession of any and in any case export of jewellery was prohibited. You can imagine how unwilling everyone was to hand over all of their most valuable objects to us - we were forced to search the baggage (which was limited to one suitcase only) ourselves and force them to hand over any significant items. I don't need to say that these were difficult situations but refusal meant being crossed off the transport list. Despite all this there were those who did not want to comply and tried to smuggle things past us thus endangering the whole transport.

During my time in Szczecin I heard of nothing ever being lost in transit – everyone got their possessions back once on the safe side of the borders.

One particular incident comes to mind. We were transporting a group of "Greek" refugees – they were instructed not to leave the train at stations, preferably not to speak with each other but if they absolutely had to then it should be in Hebrew only, as nobody should be able to identify this language, and in that way they should be able to get away as being Greek. At one of the stations a German railwayman asked someone looking out of the window what nationality they were. They answered that they were Greek. At this point he excitedly told them that there was a Greek working at the station and that he would for sure be very happy to speak with his compatriots. He went to get him…. Luckily the train got going before they came back!

We smuggled smaller groups by boats across the Szczecin Lagoon for example from Nowe Warpno or by trucks driving on small roads to Pasewalk in East Germany and from there by train to West Berlin (the wall wasn't there yet). These weren't safe routes and we did have boarder episodes from time to time. Most often money helped in such situations but if not, we had much work petitioning for the release, arranging lawyers and organising financial help for the families of the arrested. During my stay in Szczecin several of my colleagues were also in prison or awaiting sentencing. We did all we could to help - but we needed appropriate contacts and money to pay them off. Other contacts were needed to help with planning of the escapes.

Most of the small groups that were transported across the small roads and quiet border crossings by covered lorries were organised with the knowledge and assistance of the border guards, but it didn't always go to plan. In those moments it was necessary to rely on very special (and expensive) officers of the UB - the secret police.

History note

The Ministry of Public Security (Polish: Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego), commonly known as UB or later SB, was the secret police, intelligence and counter-espionage agency operating in Polish People's Republic. From 1945 to 1954 it was known as the Department of Security (UB), and from 1956 to 1990 as the Security Service (SB).

The main goal of the Department of Security was the swift eradication of the anti-communist structures and socio-political base of the Polish Underground State, as well as the persecution of former underground soldiers of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa) and later anti-communist organizations like Freedom and Independence (WiN).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Public_Security_(Poland)

Not too long after arriving in Szczecin I got to know one such high-ranking officer in UB in rather classic circumstances while partying in a popular restaurant that was attended by him and others like him. It was not an accident that I too was there at the time. He, and I already knew what he was, was in company of his wife and niece. And I was with a friend. The band was playing and at the first opportunity I asked the young lady at their table to dance. I must have made a good impression as after a few more dances I was invited to join them at their table. As we sat and drunk vodka, that I kept ordering generously (not paid from my private funds), it turned out that the niece is from Sosnowiec and is only spending a few days with her uncle and aunt. And so, we found many common topics for conversation. She was pretty, a few years younger than I and didn't know anyone in Szczecin – she was happy to meet with me again.

Getting to know an officer in UB was a great achievement for me and the organisation, one that would soon prove very useful. But much more important for me personally was getting to know a beautiful girl, a dream come true. Her uncle and aunt were also happy that their young guest found company. We began to meet more frequently, mostly in restaurants and got to know and like each other a lot, and soon I became a frequent guest in their house. To tell the truth we got to like each other a lot! It wasn't long that Basia and I realised that we are in love.

We lived at the opposite ends of town – they in a detached villa in a wealthy and largely undamaged neighbourhood, and I at the other end of town in a block that survived the bombings with minor damage only. Between us lay a large part of a ruined town. Although trams were operating, the service was infrequent and in general communication was sporadic. Walking after dark through these empty, dark, ruined areas you were at risk of being attacked and robbed by the common criminals or by drunk Russian soldiers

who were always looking for any kind of loot. And so, my new friend UB Captain Ben B. provided me with a hand gun – just in case, he said – he did not know that I already had one, illegally of course. He also gave me a gun permit – so now I was legal.

My earlier enthusiasm to work with Bricha began to wane. We had less and less "work" and the many night "entertainment" sessions involving large quantities of vodka began to get very tiresome. One night after a particularly generous drinking session I somehow, really don't know how, got into a fight with the local Milicja (Police). I was beaten up and dragged to the local police station and locked up in a dirty, stinking cell with a bunch of other drunken yobs. My attempts at an explanation, once I sobered up a bit, were being ignored. Things didn't look good for me and I don't know how it would have all ended if not for a completely unexpected intervention of my new friend Captain Ben B. who somehow heard about my predicament and decided to help. I was released immediately! I am very grateful to him for getting me out this trouble and even more so, as soon after he saved one of my friends from a much more serious situation - he was in prison awaiting trial for illegally driving a lorry with "passengers" across the border.

In general, however, life in Szczecin stopped being fun and actually became tiring. I had little in common with my work colleagues; they began to bore me. I really missed good company and especially my friends from Bytom. The brightest moments that I so looked forward to were the sadly short and infrequent visits of Basia. After her departures for Sosnowiec, at the end of a summer holiday with her family in Szczecin in 1947, when we saw each other daily, I decided to end my mission in Szczecin.

I arranged a formal release and returned to Bytom which I felt was my hometown now. After all, that's where my family lived; my mother, aunts, uncle and my brother Lutek. He returned from Russia with his wife, Irena and a small daughter, Oleńka. So after almost two years away I returned home. But this meant that yet again I faced the question of what next? In addition to the problem of not earning anything I continued to have ever more serious doubts about emigrating. I was more inclined to scrap these plans and to remain in Poland.

In the meantime, Lutek was a lawyer and already held quite a high position in the steel industry in Katowice. His wife and daughter lived in Bytom. He saw his future in Poland and did not want to consider emigration at all. My mother also didn't want to separate from her family even though her third son lived in England and tried hard to persuade her to join him. Both of my lonely aunts, Mania and Edzia, wanted to join their brother in Israel but given their age and poor health didn't have the confidence to take such a big step.

And I? I think that Basia, without whom at that time I could not imagine my future, was the final deciding factor. We were very much in love and there was no question of separation. And so, the decision was made and I began to look for work; this time for a normal job.

Fly traps and baubles

In Sosnowiec there was a factory of flytraps and other insect repelling products since the early years of the 20th century. The owner's son, Dolek M. survived the Soviet gulags in Kola Peninsula and somehow managed to return back home. On his return he took over from the temporary management of the factory and continued production. Dolek was Lutek's close school friend from the pre-war days. When during a chance conversation Lutek mentioned to him that I was looking for work he immediately offered me a job. This was a great load of my mind, as to tell the truth I had no idea how to go about finding work. How do you look for a job? Then, towards the end of 1947 there were no Job Centres, or at least I didn't know about them. And so, this job offer was a real result – I had a job working for someone I knew personally and it was in Sosnowiec where Basia lived.

I had no job description or any specific definition as to what the job involved but that was not an issue. Also, I was the only man there. During the busy season the factory employed around 20 women working the various machines such as presses, printers and other. And of course, machines require adjustment, maintenance and repair when they break. Until I appeared all this was done by an external mechanic who had to be called in when required.

Dolek rarely appeared in the factory and all day to day management was performed by an old and very dedicated to the family worker Wacka (pronounced Vatzka) Latos. As an aside, she distinguished herself hiding one of their daughters, Dolek's sister, through the war – one of the acts for which she is recognised by Yad Vashem. She is one of The Righteous Among the Nations – non-Jews who took great risks to save Jews during the Holocaust. She was my boss in the factory. And I soon became indispensable. I had a workshop with reasonable tools including a good laith, so I could easily make up parts for the machines. Dolek was happy, Wacka was happy, I was happy.

Note

This is the entry in Yad Vashem's, The Righteous Among the Nations Database about Wacka:

Wacława Latos and Józef Latos

From the age of fourteen, Wacława Latos worked in a factory in Sosnowiec that was owned by a Jewish man by the name of Mamlok. Wacława reached the position of superintendent, and when Mamlok and his family were sent to the Srodula ghetto in the suburbs of Sosnowiec, she began helping them by sneaking into the ghetto to take in food parcels. In August 1943, when the ghetto was liquidated, Mamlok's daughter, Adela Leneman, escaped from the transport carrying Jews to Auschwitz. Her husband, who later perished, pushed her off the train. Adela made her way to Wacława and Józef Latos' house in Wiejska Street. Despite their meagre living conditions, in two rooms with no running water, they took her in. Their son, Janusz, who was twelve at the time, was extremely kind to Adela and kept watch to make sure no strangers came in. Whenever a stranger was approaching, Adela hid in the closet. Nevertheless, the situation was still dangerous because Adela was very well known in Sosnowiec. Wacława and Józef managed to get "Aryan" papers for her as Adela Cesarz, which enabled her to work as a forced labourer in Austria, where her sister was. The Latos family also helped Zofia Lissak (Mamlok) and her husband Feliks, and Doctor Maksymilian Dreifus, a Czech Jew and friend of Mr. Mamlok. When the Sosnowiec ghetto was liquidated, Wacława and Józef put Maksymilian in touch with the people with whom he hid until the end of the war. After the war, Adela kept in contact with the Latos family from England, where she was living.

On December 4, 1983, Yad Vashem recognized Józef Latos and his wife, Wacława Latos, as Righteous Among the Nations.

The only downside of this job was the very long and tiring commute by unreliable trams with several changes, which typically took an hour and a half each way. A big disappointment was, despite my initial optimism, that meeting with Basia became difficult. The long working hours and tiredness meant that we mostly saw each other on Sundays (Saturday was a normal working day) and only if her parents didn't have other plans for her, which they often did. Occasionally she would come to the factory at lunchtime so that we could meet during the break.

Summer and autumn were the seasons for flytraps. The production started at full capacity in the spring but by the late summer we had to let people go as the demand dropped for the winter. Dolek wanted to keep the workers all year round but this needed a different set of seasonal products. He had an idea that the winter gap could be filled by manufacturing Christmas tree baubles. The snag was that none of us knew how to do it - I volunteered to find out and then teach the others – winter was approaching fast.

Having found an address of a local manufacturer of Christmas decorations in the phone book I waited outside the gates of the factory for the workers to come out at the end of the day. As they did, I struck up a conversation with one of them and as it turned out I was very lucky as he was one of their specialists. While having a glass or two of vodka in a local restaurant – I had some experience of such things – I explained to him my purpose. After discussing the price, he agreed to be my teacher and I began my new career as a bauble blower. As at that time there was no gas in Sosnowiec, Dolek rented a simple workshop in Katowice where we bought a few gas burners and some other tools, also a supply of long glass tubes, paints, special chemicals used to apply the silver coating and glitter and I began to learn. I was a good student and found that blowing was easy. Although I was still some way off perfection but after a few hours, a waste of a large number of tubes and some gas, I was able to produce something that resembled a bauble. Learning how to silver coat and simple painting was easier still and so a after a few more lessons I decided that my skills were sufficient to start teaching others. Wacka sent to me three of her most skilful girls, who did indeed learn to blow baubles very quickly and soon we were able to start a small production for sale - but that was not my responsibility. I converted our machines to production of packaging and the factory was ready to produce products all year round.

In the meantime, my private life wasn't going at all well. Attacks on Jews did not stop and reports of beatings and even murders continued. The topic of emigration to Israel was at the core of many conversations and it did not subside. After yet another attack on a home of a Jewish doctor or maybe a dentist, I can't remember, my uncle Samek, in fear for his wife and child (Maniusha / Miriam) applied to emigrate. Dolek got married and they too decided to start a family in Israel. Although I previously put aside any thoughts of emigration out of my mind, the circumstances and events were troubling and continued to spoil my inner peace. At these moments however, my thoughts kept going to Basia. Increasingly I kept questioning if under the circumstances we should be getting involved more and more deeply. I also realised that her parents did not approve of our relationship and were afraid as to what it might lead to. I am sure that in their eyes, practicing Catholics, I wasn't a perfect choice of a husband for their only daughter. I understood and also feared if Basia could be happy with me in the longer term. Love is love but reason prevailed in my head. I painfully concluded that my conscience could not be clear if I knowing caused a split at some point in the future by being who I am - I imagined that for her it would be a huge blow. As I saw it, a split now was likely to be less damaging for her going forward. It was a huge challenge for me to tell her and how to convince her that splitting up sooner rather than later was best for her future happiness. In the end this is how it had to be.

I remember very clearly how after reading a very long letter that I wrote to her – I could not bring myself to tell it to her face – she appeared at the factory gates the next day in tears and a terrible state. Wacka let us into her office and discretely withdrew leaving us alone. It was a very long and difficult conversation for us both, possibly harder for her than me but finally she agreed that I was right, or maybe she only said it to make me feel better. In the end we both walked towards her house, mostly in silence, and finally had to say goodbye. But not for ever as we promised each other to remain good honest friends for ever. We kept this promise remaining friends and continuing to meet with our respective families – she had a husband and a son - until our departure from Poland in 1969.

In the meantime, life continued and I commuted to Sosnowiec or Katowice and the production of baubles continued.

My uncle Samek finally got the passports and permission to leave together with his wife. It was a very sad farewell with a feeling that we shall never meet again. A few months earlier his first child, a son, died tragically from

diphtheria that ironically wasn't recognised early enough by doctors. The family had great difficulty reconciling with this.

My brother was in the midst of a divorce and the biggest issue was who the 4-year old daughter should live with. Willingly or not I listened to many sad conversations between my mother and my aunts. The topics were predictable – divorce, death of a child, Samek's emigration, my future - but in the end it was all coming back to matters concerning emigration to Israel. These conversations would become more heated after each subsequent act of antisemitism – in a way just as in Catholic homes, and in only the very close family circles and even then, quietly, there would be talk of the authorities led disturbances during pilgrimages to Piekary or Czestochowa for example, or other acts of persecution of priests. Each community had their problems. "Everyone has a moth that bites them".

Once Dolek received permission to leave, and although he wasn't shutting down the factory – just passed the running back to Wacka, I decided to start looking for a job in Bytom. I was in a much better position, knew a lot more about how things functioned and was confident of finding something easily. In the meantime, however it was the end of 1948 and start of the carnival season with many occasions for fun, parties, balls – unfortunately without Basia.

Office job

In February 1949 I got a job at the central office of Manufacturers of Wire and Wire Products in Bytom. I was taken on as a technical section leader and immediately became an expert in at that time a completely unknown to me discipline. Of course, it might have been in recognition of the years I spent working in a Russian tractor repair workshops (MTS) and later in a factory in Sosnowiec, both of which taught me the skill of how to distinguish between a wire and a string, or a screw and a nail.

Thanks to my new head of department, Mr. Baran, I quickly began to get to know my job, starting with the work methods of the department. Our boss applied the following rules; on receipt of an official letter or document he first of all considered whether the matter must be dealt with solely by our department or there is a chance that it could be passed on to another department. If he considered that it was indeed his responsibility alone to deal with it, he analysed what might be the consequence of not doing anything at all about it. If he considered that indeed it was nothing of very great consequence, he would file the document in his bottom drawer. In this way our boss continued to increase our not inconsiderable difficulties of

trying to look busy while having nothing to do. We didn't complain however. Other than that, and for different reasons he was an ideal boss. He very rarely looked into our office but was always ready to share a glass of vodka with our participation – during working hours – in our office. One of the filing cabinets drawers was dedicated to the storage of bottles. And as to glasses, we used the thick green glasses that mustard was sold in, which were part of standard office equipment in most places and kept in the desk drawers. In this aspect we were very well trained.

There were eight of us in the department. Marian B, also from Sosnowiec, two Polish Silesians my age – Wicek A. and Frederik Sz. both of whom as Silesians were compulsorily drafted into the German army and while in Africa, following the German defeat, changed uniforms for Polish ones. There was an older chap from the far eastern part of Poland who before the revolution studied engineering in St. Petersburg and spoke with a very strong, distinctive eastern accent. There was a "German" from Zabrze, he was a drunk and a very devout Catholic – I never asked how he spent the war. And two young girls; draftsmen, or rather draftswomen.

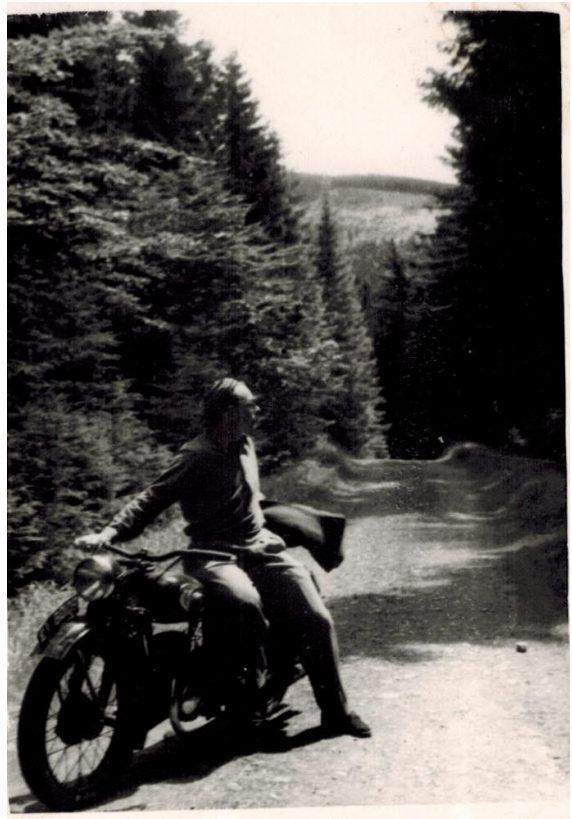
A few days after I started, a companywide inventory exercise was announced. We were trained, given large sheets of lined paper and we started to count things, the wealth of our firm. Every Bakelite ashtray, every portrait of Bierut (leader of the Polish Communist Party at the time) or some other worthy person, wicker paper baskets, coat hangers, desks, chairs and there were many different kinds, not to mention such treasures as old worn out type writers, abacus, old arithmometers (mechanical calculators / adding machines); in other words everything that could not be scrunched up and thrown into the bin. Every item in every room had to have its own entry and it all had to be summed this way and that and double checked thoroughly. We worked very seriously and conscientiously. Not one of us could use an abacus and the old rickety arithmometers were too prone to produce wrong results, so we counted the long columns of numbers manually – counting aloud; each one of us working on their inventory sheets. Marian B. and I were counting in Polish, the chap from the East was adding up in Russian and the German was doing it in German. And so, you could simultaneously hear einundzwanzig, sorok czetyry, trzydziesci jeden, piat'dziesijat, dwadziescia dwa, siebenunddreißig and so on. In all this noise it was possible to immediately tell who went to which school and where.

One day I was called into our Personnel manager's office where B. Piecuch, the manager, tried very hard to persuade me to join the (Communist) Party. I twisted and strained as much as I could to resist, even though I already knew at the time that not joining would cause me problems later. A few days later he called me in once more and it was even harder to resist, especially that I didn't know what he knew about my activities in Szczecin. I left his office relieved and without membership. Since then I had no further offers from him or any other Personnel manager. Instead, and just as I expected, I was often bypassed for promotion or advancement to a better position. However, as a reward for not joining the Party I gained trust among many of my office colleagues. I was liked, possibly for my humour, for the practical jokes, for never refusing to party and for not shirking from the odd glass or two, which I "didn't pour behind my collar" and in general for being a good friend. It all sounds a bit boastful but I think that those who know me, even today, would mostly agree. And so, the time spent in the office didn't drag despite there being little work to fill the 8 hours.

Motor vehicles of any sort weren't common in those days in Poland and even less so in a provincial backwater such as Bytom. Our Company, in charge of all of the Polish production of wire and its products, had three cars; DKV, Skoda and a Citroen – all old pre-war models. From childhood I was interested in cars and motorcycles and so I took any opportunity to go on a trip. In this way I got to know our company drivers, one of whom also had a huge motorbike which he occasionally took me for a ride on. I was very jealous of him but realised that for me to own my own bike was a "pie in the sky". Although there was already production of bikes in Poland their high price and scarcity made buying one an impossibility. About that time one of my aunt's new husband from Czestochowa told me that one of his workers had an old German motorbike which he was willing to sell cheaply. I remember that its price was equivalent to approximately one and a half months of my salary. I also remember that completely unwittingly the answer to my predicament of where to get the money from came from my small niece. She frequently suffered with tonsillitis and the ENT specialist who treated her suspected that someone in her close circle could unknowingly be a carrier of the bacteria. As I too suffered this infection frequently as a child and we both lived together at my mother's, I let myself

be examined. The diagnosis was clear; my tonsils had to be removed not to risk the possibility of spreading the infection to Oleńka. And so, this friendly ENT specialist offered to admit me to a newly created ward that he was in charge of. My thought was that if I could stay in hospital long enough, I would save on my spending and together with a loan from the office and an advance on my next month's salary I might just have enough to buy the bike.

The ward smelled of fresh paint and was almost empty. In three multi occupancy rooms there were only five patients. The nurses didn't have much to do and were bored. The patients, apart from one who had an ear infection, didn't cause any problems and soon we started to make our stay there more fun. This wasn't hard as the ward was well stocked with surgical spirit and there were no particular checks on its consumption. It took two weeks for my puzzled consultant to establish the clotting factor of my blood. After the operation I went home where I stayed long enough to finally be able to go to Czestochowa with cash in my pocket. My friendly office driver took me there on his bike and helped me with his expertise. We returned separately, he on his bike and I, with great pride on mine! It was a really old and much worn out bike but for me it was a fulfilment of my dreams.



At this point I can't resist to go back in time and tell a story of a bike that my friends at the Polytechnic bought for a price of a half a litre of vodka from a Russian soldier who most likely stole it somewhere. To look at it was probably better suited for a display in a museum, and it wasn't possible to check if it worked as there was no petrol or oil in it, but the price was decisive. My friends lived in a student hall of residents which at the time was nothing more than an old building requisitioned for the purpose. The large multi-room flat, vacated by the Germans and emptied of all possibly valuable objects, including furniture, was allocated to students who were happy to have a roof over their heads. Each room had a few iron beds, there was a wardrobe, a table in the middle of one room and a random collection of few other pieces of furniture. The rest was left to the initiative of the occupants.

It is to such a room, on a second floor of the building, with four beds by the walls and a big round table covered by an old velvet cloth, that my friends

brought their newly acquired bike. By the time I came to visit the bike had already been taken apart and all the parts cleaned up were ready for reassembly. But we needed petrol and oil to make it work - and these were not easy to find. The petrol stations were bombed out ruins and so it required some cunning to find what we needed, but we were well used to that and within a short time we had a litre bottle of lighter fuel and a bottle of castor oil, usually used as a laxative. We filled the bike and after a few kicks it started, bellowing out noxious fumes. Castor oil did not prove to be the best oil for the purpose but the bike did work somehow and we were able to ride it around the table, having moved the chairs out of the way, round and round. The room was so full of horrible exhausts that soon we couldn't see the walls so we opened the windows. Outside, passers-by stopped and looked at our windows from which clouds of smoke were bellowing and the noise of an engine was like at a motor cross stadium.

Next day's field trial ended sooner than planned. We left the bike for literary a few minutes on the street outside a shop and it disappeared. Maybe it was taken by the previous owner. Easy come, easy go as the saying goes.

But back to my new acquisition – where to keep it, how to fix it, where to get parts from, etc. - all the usual problems but I had a bike. I joined a local club, "Polonia" and we started going to all sorts of events and after each there was much to talk about and many stories to tell in the office, helping to fill the inactive, boring time waiting for the end of each working day. There were always a lot of topics; how my friend and I swapped seats while riding; him moving from the back seat to the front and me in the opposite direction and many other idiotic things we did and somehow got away with. There was much to chat about in the office.

That winter I caused a situation that could have easily affected my life for many years to come. It was Carnival time and an office committee was organising a big office party. We agreed that the walls and the windows of the hall would be covered by sheets of thick grey paper which I would paint with cheery winter scenes. Having spent several evenings creating my art work, the final result exceeded even my own expectations. Everyone else was also most impressed with the decorations and we couldn't wait for Saturday night. I too was excited and not only because of the party but also because I had a week of a skiing starting on Sunday. The Gliwice

Polytechnic organised a ski trip to Karkonosze mountains, and I was going with them; with a few of my friends who persuaded me to join them despite the fact that I did not have the necessary allocation of accommodation or food. They were convinced that we will manage somehow and the main thing is that we will have a great time. I liked the idea and arranged to meet them at the station in Gliwice on Sunday morning. There was one slight problem and this was how to get there early on Sunday morning, but my director, as a reward for my artistic efforts, promised me the use of the company car and driver – this was indeed an ideal solution for me.

Suddenly and in great anger, while the party was in full swing, I began to tear down all my decorations that I worked on for so many evenings. I was pulling everything down and tearing it to pieces. Music stopped, everyone stopped dancing – no one knew what happened to me - personnel manager, 1st secretary of the Party, trade union leader, all tried to calm me down to no avail. I was furious and going on about it being mine and I could do what I liked with it – I was of course drunk…

And the reason behind my "performance" was my disappointment and anger at my director who previously having promised me a lift to the station the following morning suddenly announced that he changed his mind and will not give me a lift – he too was drunk at the time. I told him that if he can be like that so can I. And I began to tear things down. Obviously, I spoilt the party, most started to leave, leaving behind only the very drunk who probably didn't notice anything anyway. Some of my disappointed, by the sudden end of a good party, colleagues expressed opinions that it will cost me dearly; I will be in trouble for disrespecting the State, commercial sabotage, disturbance of public order, defacing… etc. etc. in any case it will end very badly for me. I too, while beginning to sober up, realised the stupidity of my actions but I couldn't undo it.

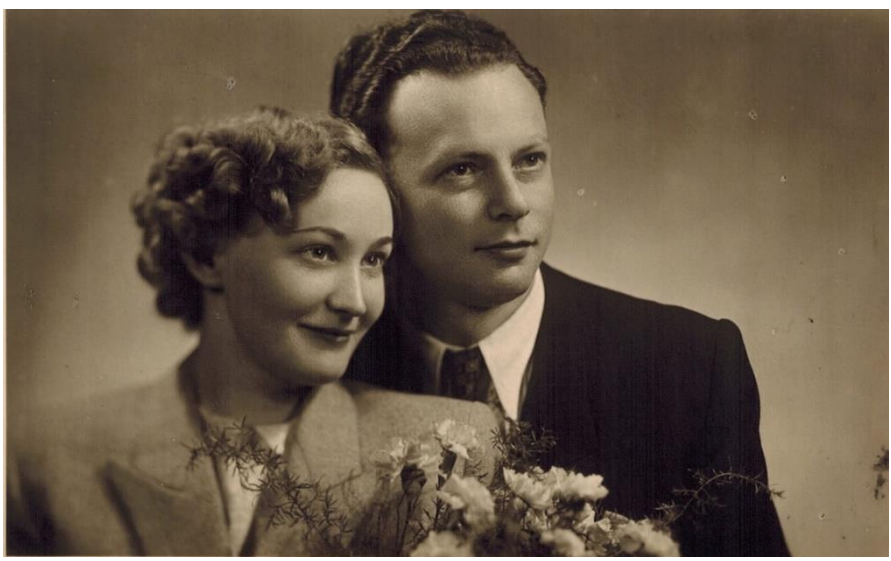
I have no idea how I got to Gliwice the next morning but I did, and we left as a whole large group for our skiing holiday. The arrangements there weren't as simple as we hoped – bed I shared with a friend was narrow and not comfortable but there was no other choice. The meals situation was a bit more difficult as everyone had to present a coupon to get the food and I didn't have any coupons. But we did manage somehow and I was never hungry.

A week later, after a week's absence, I was returning to the office somewhat afraid. I was fully expecting a difficult conversation in the director's office but there were no signs of anything during the day. My colleagues also didn't talk about what happened. Slowly everyone's memory of that infamous event was fading, and they began to reminisce about it in a happy way – and so did I.

Mira

During the next year's Carnival, I met Mira, my future wife with whom we continue to share our promise – for better for worse… This however weighs on me heavily as I have so many doubts given my background and recent history that I will be able to keep her safe, provide for and offer a future for us. I have much guilt being unsure that I can deliver on the promises. So, I joke that I will keep my side of the promise; that for as long as I am alive, she will never eat dry bread… it will at least have tears on it…

A few months later, on 7 June 1952 we got married in the registry office in Bytom.



Party at home in Mira's Parents flat.

From left to right – sitting: Adam (Mira's brother), Mira with Olenka, my mother Regina, aunt Mania, aunt Edzia Standing: Henryka, Mira's mother, I, ?, Lutek, ?, Jozef, Mira's father

Honeymoon in the mountains

Our married life started by us living with Mira's parents – while applying for an allocation of our own flat. There was such a shortage that to get your own flat was equivalent to winning a lottery however. As the whole of Bytom was located on top of a very rich coal stream, which were more valuable than the buildings, the initial plan was to build a new town elsewhere. But as the means were very limited the mining engineers came up with a plan to remove the coal gradually, over a decade or more, thus allowing the town to sink some 3 metres without too much damage to the buildings - these were the theoretical calculations anyway. In practice many buildings cracked and became uninhabitable, which continues to this day. The resulting shortage of housing and the priority given to those whose buildings collapsed caused a great housing shortage. The building program could not satisfy the demand. In this situation and without a chance of getting our own place I asked for a transfer to one of the factories where we would be guaranteed a flat. The factory was in Olkusz, a small town some 50 km from Bytom. The newly built block had not been finished yet so initially I lived in a temporary bedsit alone while Mira stayed with her parents in Bytom. She was already pregnant and the situation was getting more and more urgent. Tomek was born in Bytom but soon after our new flat was finally finished and we were able to move in. When I say finished it is a great exaggeration as nothing in the building was finished or complete. There was no water in the taps as the pumps kept breaking down several times a day, there was no hot water other than by heating it on top of the kitchen stove or the bathroom boiler. Both the stoves, as well as the fireplace in the living room, were coal fired. Lighting them was a great art as there was no draft in the chimney so most of the smoke came into the flat. Windows didn't fit and were impossible to shut properly, etc. Outside was just a muddy building site which would become a bog following any rain. This was the place that we moved into with our few months' old child.

I would leave for work in the morning and return eight hours later. During this time Mira took care of the child, starting with lighting the fires to heat the milk and the bath water, cook and feed Tomek – there were no ready meals or baby food – carry the pram down the stairs and go shopping for bread in the bakery, butter in "mleczarnia" (shop selling milk and eggs), a piece of meat at the butcher, vegetables at the green grocer and so on – and

everywhere there were queues. And then on her return to the flat she had to cook and clean and wash the nappies – no disposable ones then – iron and of course play with Tomek.

I experienced a small dose of such domestic activity when early one morning I was woken up by Mira feeling very unwell and with a high temperature, also a bad stomachache. All she wished for was a cup of hot tea. I jumped out of bed, threw some clothes on – couldn't wash as there was no water in the taps, so ran down to the cellar to turn some valves, fiddle with the pump and knock a few pipes hoping that water would start running again – it worked. While there I filled a bucket with coal and on return upstairs started to light the kitchen stove. There was smoke, lots of smoke but no flames – kettle obviously cold. In the meantime, Tomek woke up crying. Mira no longer wanting tea but insisting that I take care of him, as the nappies must be wet and he needs changing, and of course he will need feeding soon – I need to cook something or at least heat the milk. I am running from the kitchen to the room and back, carrying nappies, bottle, bowl with water, sponge, then back again for his dummy… I am blowing at the fire, adding more coal and soon there is a small pile of dirty nappies – how many times can he dirty his nappies? Soon I will run out of clean ones – need to wash a few.

Mira still hasn't had her tea or aspirin or anything else and it's almost noon. Luckily, very luckily, Mira began to feel a little better and somehow as if by magic everything began to get back to normal. Tomek got fed and stopped crying and Mira could take care of herself… How much easier it is to go to work in the morning and come back later to a clean and tidy flat, happy, dry and clean child, ready dinner, shirts pressed, fresh bread and other things in the pantry and after dinner collapse on the sofa with a newspaper or a book and rest – all I need to do is ask for the child not to cry as it disturbs the peace… Very luckily for all of us this was the last time that Mira got sick.

Life in Olkusz, in our very basic, small flat didn't suit us. We were used comforts such as running hot and cold water, effective heating in the winter, gas cooker, telephone and in general, living in a town with cinemas, a theatre, trams and pavements, and close to our Families and our friends. My job was neither satisfying nor well paid and so I started to look for a return to Bytom. Finally, after almost two years of enjoying our own space we

returned to live with Mira's parents. Although the previous discomforts went away, they were replaced by other stresses resulting from two families cohabiting limited space – in fact there were seven of us in the flat; Mira's parents, brother, grandmother and the three of us. Frictions could start at any time - sharing the kitchen or clothes drying space in the loft and so on. And the fact that it involved a mother and daughter made it often worse. Luckily these conflicts didn't happen too often and we always managed to resolve them and remain friends.

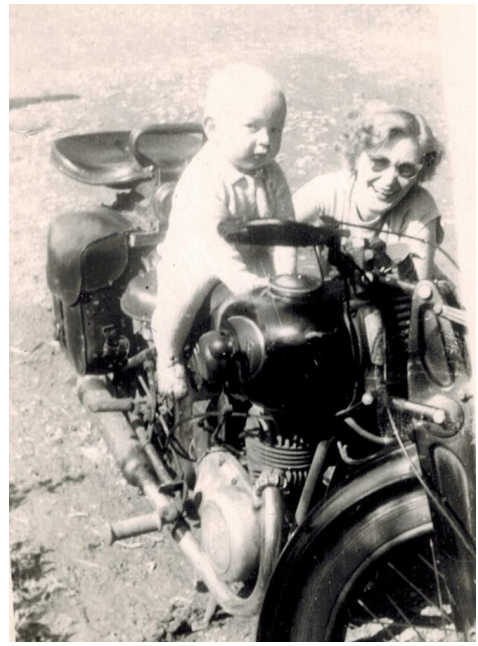
I returned to my old office, to a similar position as before, and to my old friends – it looked that our return to Bytom was definitely the right decision.

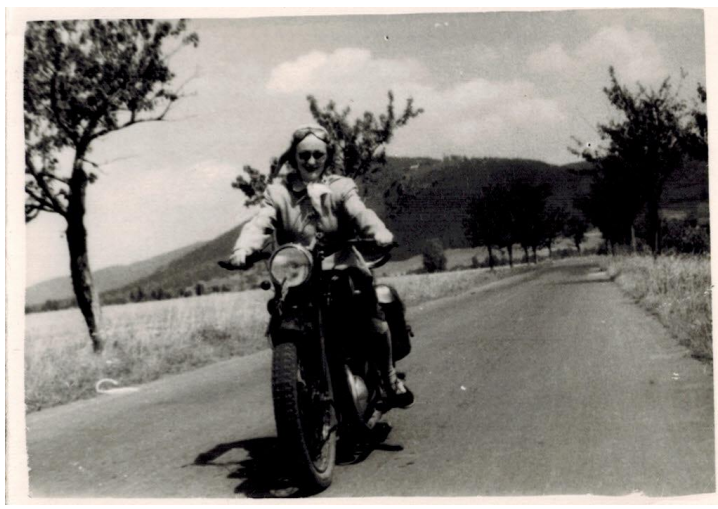
At that time, I already had a new motorbike; much more contemporary in comparison with the previous one. I bought it from my brother Lutek who got it while on an extended work assignment in East Germany. Soon after his return from this trip he won the first prize in a lottery - a brand new, state of the art – in those days an object of considerable desire and envy of millions of Poles!

At this point it might be interesting to describe a somewhat typical approach of the authorities:

While registering his new car the inland revenue got suspicious as to how he managed to afford such a car on his earnings while supporting a family - a car that cost several times his annual salary. They called Lutek in for questioning but without being specific of the topic and proceeded to ask him vary many detailed questions, including how frequently he went to the cinema, how much he spent on books, newspapers, clothes, how much his daughter's school cost and many other details; all the time taking careful notes. Lutek answered all the questions in detail and after an hour or so the investigator calculated and announced that it is impossible on his salary, and given his expenditure, to buy a new car and that he should explain where the money came from. At this point my brother said that he did not buy the car but won it on the lottery and showed the corroborating documentation. The investigator got angry why he didn't tell him this an hour ago – because you didn't ask – I answered all your questions as you asked them, was my brother's reply. This is a true story but really no one believed him that he won it.

Nobody asked me to explain how I got my bike. We travelled on it a lot; day trips, holidays, initially just the two of us and later with Tomek whom Mira held squashed between us.





One summer Mira and Tomek were on holiday in Wisła, and I was due to join them on my bike for a few days at the end of the week. Halfway to Wisła I had an accident – to avoid a pedestrian I turned sharply and ended up in

a ditch. Despite my injuries I got myself up, blood streaming down my face and in pain all over. My choices were to wait for someone to call an ambulance and the police – could take a long time and I had no means to contact Mira, or to try to get going. The bike was damaged as was I, but I decided that it should be possible to continue. It soon became clear that this was not as easy as I hoped. My leg swelled badly and hurt a lot and I couldn't really use it, the bike had no lights and kept misfiring. I was afraid that if I stop or it stalls, I won't be able to get off it by myself and restart it by kicking the pedal, so I continued with much effort and finally and very late in the evening I got there. Mira was very concerned as she knew what time I left and how long it should take to get to them and that I was riding a bike. But after three hours of waiting, she finally saw me; covered in blood and in much pain. Our hosts, a local farming family that we rented a room from, carried me onto a bed. Next day Mira called an ambulance and they took me to hospital where they found something cracked, bandaged me up and brought me back to continue with our holiday. After a week we had to return to Bytom with our luggage, child and a broken bike, while I was still in much pain. One way would have been to take a train but nothing was that simple, especially in my condition. To put the bike onto a train it had to be emptied of petrol, which of course meant that it had to be picked up at the destination without any petrol in it and so on. In the end we decided, with some reservations, that we will send the baggage by train and the three of us will travel back by bike. The plan was that I would get on the bike; someone will give me a push till the bike starts and then I shall return to pick up Mira and Tomek without getting off the bike; I will just lean on my good leg and this way we will make it home. And this is how we started and all looked good, except that we did not foresee that after half an hour Tomek would start crying wanting food – he was a year old at the time. Although Mira did have a ready bottle for him, she couldn't feed him while holding on to him with one hand and the bike handle with the other – there was no other way but to stop somewhere. The weather was nice, we pulled off the road into a nice meadow and soon Tomek was fed and changed. The only problem was that I switched the engine off for the duration of our stop and there was no way for me to get off the bike and kick start it. And so, Mira wrapped Tomek in a blanket and laid him down on the grass. She then pushed me onto the tarmac praying that the bike starts soon. Luckily it did.

She returned to Tomek, who by then was already getting anxious, while I turned a circle and got back to pick them up, and after a while we continued our journey all the way to Bytom. Once we got there, we had to confront Mira's Parents. Among other things I heard from them was a lesson on responsibility, consideration for others, wisdom and got much advice on family matters. All I could do was to put my head down and listen. As it happens, I soon sold the bike and began to dream of how it might be possible to get a car, but the real priority was to get our own place to live first.

Krynica 1956

Finally, I saw a small but potentially realistic possibility. One day during a Workers Council meeting, I questioned the usefulness of one of the company's common rooms, which was rarely used. In my opinion a relatively minor conversion could turn it into two flats to provide accommodation for two families of the employees. My colleagues backed my idea and a seed was sawn - I begun to dream of moving into our own flat.

Our flat

Finally, after much pressure from the Workers Council the Company decided to implement the proposed conversion and create two flats. I was one of a handful of candidates – actually there weren't many as the layout was such that one of the flats was accessed by walking through your neighbour's hall, and there was a shared coal fired central heating boiler in their kitchen. There were other smaller faults also but none of these caused me concern and I tried very hard to get the allocation – but I still doubted our chances. When the news reached me that we were indeed allocated the flat we couldn't believe our luck! Mira was on holiday with Tomek and there was no phone there so I couldn't wait for the Sunday when I would go to them and share the news.

We moved in just after the holidays in the summer of 1956.

Our flat was large and comfortable and we had very friendly and helpful neighbours. My office was in the building next door making my commute rather quick – I would leave home when the clock started striking 8 o'clock and was at my desk before it finished striking the hour. Or at least that was the theory as in practice I was often late, sometimes very late.

As a non-party member I wasn't considered for any significant promotions but at the same time I was not by-passed when it came to the lesser reshuffles. My salary as a middle ranking manager was modest and although I gave it all to Mira, she constantly struggled to make ends meet. Unfortunately, despite her very frugal use of resources it didn't always work out. We often had to resort to borrowing money in all sorts of ways while all the time we looked at ways of supplementing our income. Occasionally I managed to get some extra assignment that filled a gap in our budget but mostly it was Mira who through her enterprise was able to add to our income.

Still while living with her parents she started a stocking repair service. She invested in a special electric mending machine and in between queueing for butter or meat and taking Tomek for a walk she mended stockings. Later, when the demand dropped off, she sold the piano that we brought with us from her parents' home and bought a knitting machine and started to knit jumpers on a similar basis as when mending the stockings but with much

more stress. There was also a period when she made fashionable at the time decorations from coloured sponges – flowers and birds that women pinned to their jumpers or jackets. When that fad passed, she made thin white flannel ladies' jackets - she would buy men's long johns (!) wherever she could and somehow create the much sought-after garments. When that ended, she painted silk scarfs – this required searching out suitable raw materials available in only a few of the state-run shops and effectively rationed. I tried to help of course as much as I could but not knowing how to knit or saw my usefulness was rather limited.

At one point our closest friend Kazik and Ada left for Israel (in 1956). Others intended to follow in their footsteps, including a husband of one of my aunts, whose brother was already in Israel, was also considering emigration. They were both over 60, with no children and lived in Poland through the occupation under very difficult conditions and could not see their old age in Poland. They claimed that in Israel they would have more friends and would generally be amongst their own.

When thinking of emigration, the thought of improving our material situation was a consideration, as despite my earnings being probably above the national average and Mira's income, we still only just managed to cover our day to day needs and there was no chance of saving. Added to this were constant shortages of food stuffs and other every day products. When something did appear in a particular shop the queues lasted for hours and there was never any guarantee that by the time it was finally your turn the product will still be there. And of course, the political situation wasn't exactly pleasant.

The thoughts, and concern for the future, did not go away and one day after many sleepless nights and long talks we decided to leave. It was summer of 1958. My brother sent us air tickets to London, and on that basis, we submitted an application for passports - but we had to specify Israel as our destination. As part of the application we had to submit many documents and certificates, including a statement confirming that I have informed my employer of my intentions. Two weeks later, and still without any certainty of getting permission to leave, I was dismissed from my job. Sometime later we received our passports but still concerned and unfamiliar with the process I wanted to ensure that they would apply for travel to UK also. I re-

submitted my application and passports into the local Police office, as was the procedure. Short while later we were informed that the authorities changed their mind and withdrew our permission to travel altogether. In the meantime, the validity of the plane tickets was about to expire and I had to send them back to my brother so that he could claim a refund – the cost of these tickets was significant. Without the tickets however I wasn't able to appeal against the decision.

I had no job and no income, and a wife and a son who would suffer the consequences of my actions. I felt completely responsible for the situation that I caused.

Thanks to the support of my friends, who did not condemn me for our failed plans and did not turn their backs on us, I found a lowly paid job in a very junior role as a draftsman. It was a job that I was over qualified for and too experienced for but it meant that we could survive. Mira never complained even though this attempt resulted in Tomek never having siblings.

After some time, following our failed attempt to emigrate, we began to slowly return to some normality. This was helped by me getting a job in my old office in a similar position as before. Our financial situation also began to improve, especially once Mira managed to obtain a concession to run a lottery kiosk – Totolotek. We bought a second-hand kiosk, restored it, got permission to place it close to our home and Mira was ready for business. She gave up her other home production activities, searching for ideas, materials, clients, etc. and instead took on the responsibilities of keeping strict opening hours selling lottery tickets, paying out prizes and submitting very complex weekly reports. The end of week takings had to be reconciled and submitted in person after closing every Saturday evening – any shortfall had to be covered from own pocket. This did happen from time to time and obviously impacted her earnings. One big downside of this job was that on a Saturday, when everyone else finished work early, she had the longest day and a late evening submitting the report and takings. Most of the punters waited till almost the last moment to buy their coupons making Saturday afternoons particularly busy. After closing Mira, we all helped, counted the takings – lots and lots of coins – filled in a very complicated report and once everything tallied, she had to take it all to the local lottery office in person. There everything was checked again and only

then accepted. At this point week-end could start – it was typically 10pm by then. Saturday was definitely a most busy and chaotic day of the week for us.

As time went on our life stabilised - I had a wife and a healthy son, we both had permanent jobs, a well-furnished flat, finally a TV and even a telephone. The only thing to complete our happiness would be to own a car. It had been a few years since I gave up my motorbike and I looked with increasing envy as a growing number of our friends began to enjoy four wheels. And so, we started dreaming and imagining how this could be achieved within our means. In the end, and with the help of my mother and my brother and a bank loan, I found a car that we could afford. It was an old Polish made Syrena - their oldest model and with some body damage, but as after all I was a mechanic. I bought it despite some of my friends' reservations. On one of our first runs with Tomek, with all my expertise, the car "broke down" – it turned out that we run out of petrol and the car was good.

Syrena

By all accounts we felt that we have reached a standard probably higher than an average Polish family. Of course, we weren't any better off financially day to day, and in fact maybe the opposite was true as we had greater expenditure and responsibility, but to the outside world everything looked good. We lived happily, without major disruptions and

extravagance, with a mostly empty wallet but at peace and definitely not unhappy.

Winter outing

Towing Tomek on a sledge behind the car

1960s

My brother Adam lived in England. In 1939 he was studying in Paris and on the day that the war broke out he volunteered for service in a then being created Polish Army in Coëtquidan, to fight arm in arm with the French against the Germans. However, as the French army gave up on their national duty rather quickly, the only thing left for the partially formed Polish divisions was to attempt an evacuation to England. Given the large numbers and the ensuing panic this wasn't simple however, but in this way my brother, wearing a Polish NCO uniform found himself in England, having boarded Arandora Star which was one of the last ships departing France from Sait Jean de Luz on 25 June 1940. After the war he completed his studies, got married and settled in London.

In 1959 Adam, as one of the very few who during the war were in the Polish Army in the West, succumbed to our; mother, brother and me, persuasions and braved a visit to us in Poland. He came by car with his heavily pregnant wife Jean and two small sons, Andrew and James. I remember the stir that his car created – the only western car in Bytom. Cars with English number plates were incredibly rare in the whole of Poland.

From left to right: Lutek, Mother, Andrew, Jean, Olenka, Mira, Tomek, I, James, Adam and their Vauxhall Cresta behind.

So as not to spend the whole holiday in the smoky, dirty industrial Bytom we decided to go to Ustroń, a small holiday resort in the Beskidy Mountains, relatively close to Bytom; a place where we all spent a lot of time as children and liked very much. For Adam and Jean, we rented a room in the Dom Zdrojowy in Wisła – this should have been the best available accommodation in the area. We on the other hand rented private rooms, which were more basic, with no washbasin in the room and an outside loo. It turned out that their place wasn't much better and their room was dreadful. On top of that they were robbed one day and so all in all they did not have the best time as was our hope. So much so that despite my brother coming to Poland for holidays with his sons many times through the sixties, and our assurances that the conditions have much improved, his wife never returned to Poland – even when we assured her of excellent, western standards of hotels in Krynica or Zakopane – she just wouldn't be persuaded.

On holiday in Sopot 1960

Adam came almost every year, bringing his sons with him, and we would spend a couple of weeks together mostly by the sea. We went to the beach, ate ice cream, drove around sightseeing and did other things that one does on holiday. During such times there were always many conversations between us when Adam encouraged us to leave Poland and come to join him in England. He did not realise that this was simply impossible for us. Sure, there were the odd cases of Jewish families, and even some mixed families emigrating but always only to Israel. I could not however guarantee my growing son and a non-Jewish wife safe and comfortable life in Israel, in particular given the increasing reports of growing unrest and threats in the region. Added to this was the relentless government propaganda about

an apparently very negative attitude of the Israeli population towards Polish – Catholics and their children, who were allegedly hounded there.

I could not be persuaded by my brother's assurances that getting permission to go to Israel automatically meant that one had to go there. According to him it was sufficient to cross the Polish border and once out we could decide where to go next. He tried to assure us that he will make all the necessary arrangements once we arrive in Vienna or Rome for example. Such conversations, that he often returned to, were upsetting and left long lasting impression.

Much later news would reach us that many of those that left for Israel would indeed end up in Canada or USA or closer by in Sweden or Austria. This appeared to confirm my brother's words and softened my negative stance. We also took into account other factors against, including that neither Mira nor I had a specific profession or trade, that we could practice elsewhere, we didn't know any other languages, had no capital to sustain us through the initial period and neither of us had the inner drive and initiative to create a new life ourselves. And maybe most importantly, I was being warned that my brother could not be relied on for support – in any case I knew how difficult he could be to get on with. There were frequent conflicts between him and the rest of the family during his visits. We knew that he was valued as an architect while employed at a well-respected London firm but he had difficulty working in a team.

From the moment that USSR got involved in the supply of arms; tanks, guns, fighter planes, etc. to the Arab countries, Poland changed its attitude towards Israel. Initially these changes were well camouflaged but inevitably began to reflect on the internal situation in Poland.

In the meantime, Tomek was growing up probably not really conscious of everything that was happening around him. He went to school, had many friends, belonged to the Scouts, went on summer and winter camps, and for sure did not think about the future; the next 10 or 15 years. Although we were healthy and had no problems, we felt strongly that his future, with everything that inevitably awaits him in Poland, will be much safer and generally better in the West.

In 1967 Tomek and I got an invitation and tickets from Adam to visit England at Easter. The authorities did not allow whole families to leave the country, afraid that they may not return, so at least one had to remain behind. We were almost ready to go when just a few days before our departure – tickets already booked and suitcases almost packed – Mira was taken to hospital by ambulance. She underwent an immediate surgery and had to stay in hospital for the foreseeable future – there was definitely no possibility of her returning home before our planned departure. Our trip, one in a lifetime, became questionable but after some discussion we decided that Tomek and I would still go and she would be cared for by her family. Luckily, she made good recovery and after a two week stay in London, we returned back home full of excitement but also with a first-hand experience and confirmation of Adam's difficult character.

March 1968

The world political situation continued to worsen with visible effects on the domestic situation in Poland. The conflict between East and West grew and the breakout of yet another war in the Middle East in 1967 made it much worse – the so called six-day war, named after the number of days that it took Israel to overcome a huge Egyptian army with their modern tanks and jetfighters supplied to them by the USSR. The economic situation in Poland kept getting worse and the people began to show their displeasure. All this led the government to use force to supress demonstrations and other acts of defiance. The subsequent events, that mostly took place in Warsaw, later became known as "March 1968". It all started with the authorities' withdrawal from a Warsaw theatre of a patriotic play "Dziady" (Forefathers' Eve) by Adam Mickiewicz (1798 – 1855), who is considered to be one of the greatest Polish writers, poets and activists. It resulted in a strong protest by the Warsaw University students and then quickly evolved into an extremely unpleasant period of acute official antisemitic propaganda, removal of professors and other teaching staff of Jewish extraction from their positions, mass sackings of the so-called sympathisers of Zionism across all levels and organisations, including the Army. In other words, it became known that the source of all that is wrong in the Country is the fault of Zionists. To ensure that this campaign could not be labelled as antisemitic the word "Jew" was substituted by "Zionist" – the true meaning was understood by all however. Across the whole country there were noisy pro-government demonstrations, marches, work place meetings – everywhere there were accusations, warnings and condemnation of Zionists who were guilty of all that was going wrong, from manufacturing failures, failed distribution of goods, shortages of food stuffs and many other crimes against the Polish people and of course for the rising prices – all that was wrong was the fault of Zionists. Huge signs and placards, slogans painted on walls demanded banishment of Zionists from the Country to cleanse Poland.

My brother Lutek was demoted and in my office also a young Party member was employed while questions began to be asked about my qualifications to carry out the job. It was made clear that the new starter was destined to take over from me.

All this affected Mira and I greatly – it destroyed our feeling of wellbeing and peace that we were enjoying. The sudden, and sharp rise of the antisemitic propaganda, affected all those that it was aimed at. In parallel with all the antisemitic politics and actions, the government declared that it will allow emigration to Israel for all those who want to go with a condition that the application for exit has to be submitted within a specified, and quite short, timeframe. It was not specified however what will or might happen once this time limit expires.

Many disheartened Jews, among them many who till then didn't feel Jewish, mixed marriages, people a long way off any Zionist ideals, single people, scientists, students and many others took the decision to apply. And I too, afraid of being sacked, under pressure of the government's ultimatum and afraid of missing the deadline, made the risky decision to apply to leave Poland and go … to an unknown destination.

The decision, of course, wasn't only mine. Mira was torn - she had her mother, father, brother, grandmother, and other family, this was her homeland, she could communicate with everyone in her native language and of course she wasn't being threatened. She fully realised that leaving meant that she might never again see her family but on the other hand she wanted a future, a better future, for her child and knew that this lay outside Poland. I understood her dilemma and didn't want to force her decision – I was ready to honour whatever she decided. Finally, she decided that we should leave.

On one hand I was relieved by her decision but on the other I was fully aware of my responsibility for what might happen next with us. Tomek would be taken away from his school, separated from friends, maybe from a girlfriend, he was 16 already. I persuaded Mira to part with her parents to go into the unknown without any guarantees that I can provide for our lives. But the decision was made and now was time to let everyone know – Tomek, Mira's parents, my mother. Not an easy task and we knew how each of them will experience the shocking news. Summer holidays were about to begin and we decided to wait telling them till after. Ourselves, we went, as had been already planned, to the Baltic coast to spend the last summer there; two weeks on the beach while Tomek went on a cycling summer trip with the Scouts. Eventually the time came to share our news. And the reaction…

One can to some extent imagine what that was but for us it was a great release that we no longer had to keep a secret from our nearest and dearest. At the same time however, started a very mentally stressful and physically demanding period.

In order to submit the formal applications for passports we had to obtain a mountain of various documents and certificates from a whole range of institutions. The list included a formal confirmation that I have informed my employer, confirmation that we had no outstanding financial obligations or debts, confirmation that the Army does not have any objections to my leaving, confirmation that I have informed the city administration and given an undertaking that I will return the keys to our flat, receipt of having paid for our tickets – these had to be paid in Western currency (that we did not have access to) and so on. The list was endless. Everywhere there were long queues and often you had to visit several times – a missing stamp, the manager is out or a missing signature and many other reasons for not completing the task. Many of the documents, such as copies of our birth certificates, marriage certificate, other documents, many in different towns needed to be paid for in the form of stamps and not every office sold these. All this resulted in much running around and disappointment if the place was already shut – not everywhere kept the same opening hours and so on.

There were moments that we regretted our decision; the effort was exhausting both physically and even more mentally. We didn't have the car any more so had to rely on public transport or on our own legs and all the time the deadline was getting closer. Of course, I had the time as I was no longer employed, having lost my job immediately.

When we were finally called in to collect our passports, we were required to sign an application to be released from our Polish citizenship; we became stateless. We were also clearly informed that this meant that we shall never again be able to visit Poland. In addition, Mira had to sign a disgraceful and very painful declaration that she has been fully informed that as a non-Jew she may be persecuted in Israel.

We signed everything, accepted all conditions that were put in front of us – it was too late to change our mind.

Until the moment of getting our passports it was still hard to believe that we are really leaving, that a moment will come when we have to part from all those around us, those that we met every day in the street, in a shop, that everything that surrounds us will soon belong to the past, that all the years of living in our Country with all the emotions, happiness, problems will soon and irrevocably be committed to the past, to history.

For now, however, there was no time for deliberations as we started a new phase of preparations. In accordance with strict instructions we had to obtain official permission for all the objects that we wanted to take with us. For example, this included all photographs, no matter whether they were family or holiday shots. Another institution had to confirm that our plates, cups and saucers didn't have any historical value and should not be in a museum, despite the fact that the same ones were available new in the local department store. To avoid issues with art historians we decided not to attempt to take any paintings, even though they were mostly cheap reproductions or holiday souvenirs. A few books that we did want to take with us that were printed before 1939 required a special permission. A separate permission was needed for some silver-plated cutlery and so on.

We had to get rid of a lot of stuff; furniture, rugs, bits and pieces, everything that we weren't taking with us, as the flat had to be completely cleared. Most of these things had very little or no value and very few were wanted by people we knew, as their flats were typically full of their own stuff. We sold, gave away, or simply dumped things in the rubbish. The items that we were taking with us had to be packed into custom made wooden crates. Before they could be closed, together with a detailed list of content, we had to take them for valuation at a Customs Office. Only after a detailed inspection and their approval we could close the crates shut and deliver them to a shipping company. (The three crates finally arrived to us in London 6 months later).

During that period, we also had to obtain visas from the consulates in Warsaw. We had the Israeli visas prior to passport applications, as was the requirement, but I also wanted us to have Danish visas. Simply, I wanted a formal guarantee that the worst-case scenario, that I was afraid of deep down, would not happen – and we could travel directly from Warsaw to Copenhagen.

The date of departure was approaching fast and we weren't completely ready but, in the end, the very sad day was upon us.

We were taking a morning train from Gliwice to Warsaw where we were going to spend the night and leave for Copenhagen the next day. In Bytom we said our goodbyes to all those that could not come with us to Gliwice – there were many tears. And then more tears at the station in Gliwice followed by another parting at the station, Dworzec Gdanski in Warsaw where we said goodbye to a few friends and more family. There were many promises to stay in touch and more tears, especially as the train's whistle and the chugging of carriages signalled our departure. It was 28 October 1969.

Those waving goodbyes were returning to their homes and we didn't know where our journey would take us.

My thoughts quickly moved on from thinking about what we were leaving behind onto what awaits us. I imagine that Mira felt the same except that she had the right to expect to be able to rely on me, and I only had myself. As to Tomek, and I do not recall conversations with him about his private matters or feelings, apart from feeling the loss for the world he was leaving behind, I expect that he was probably experiencing an element of adventure and was without the concerns that Mira and I had.

After a while Customs came into our compartment, shortly after followed by border guards and soon we arrived in East Berlin where we were changing trains.

29 October 1969 - Day 1 in Copenhagen – St. Lawrence in the background

From there the train took us to the ferry port of Warnemunde and after a rough crossing on to Copenhagen.

Historical footnote – text from The Danish Jewish Museum website.

Between 1969 and 1973 almost 3,000 Jews from communist Poland fled to Denmark. The Soviet controlled Polish government was under pressure by the end of the 1960'ies. The population felt considerable discontent with government censorship and displays of force. Many Poles cheered over Israel's victory in the Six-Day War in 1967. Israel had won over its enemies who had fought with Soviet weapons, and in this joy over Soviet defeat was an ill-concealed critique of the communist power apparatus. The Soviet Union reacted with an anti-Jewish campaign, and polish head of government Wladyslaw Gomulka followed with a radio speak, in which he attacked the Jews and pointed them out as a 'fifth column' who worked with western capitalists to harm Poland.

During the spring of 1968, the anti-Jewish propaganda intensified. Both Jews, who belonged to the party, and those who didn't, were fired and harassed with strong encouragement to leave the country. Many were

forced to pay for renovation of apartments, they were forced to vacate, and upon finally leaving Poland, the Jews were forced to sign a document, stating Zionist conviction and resigning Polish citizenship. The flight of the Jews from Poland was staged as emigration, but in reality, they were banished.

Denmark chose a very liberal policy towards the refugees from Poland, and practically all parties agreed that Denmark should help. All refugees were welcomed and everyone were offered residence- and work permit. The largest number of refugees came in 1969 and proved to be a challenge to the Danish Refugee Council, who had been used to receiving approx. 100 refugees a year since the Hungarian refugees arrived in 1956. The first 300 Jewish refugees from Poland were accommodated on the ship St. Lawrence in Copenhagen Harbour. Later, also hotel rooms were made available to the refugees.

The younger refugees settled in Denmark during the next few years, and many went on to marry Danes. Among the older refugees, disillusionment and loneliness were strong feelings during the first years in Denmark. The differences between the Jewish community in Denmark and this new group testify to the different perceptions of what it means to be Jewish. Many of the refugees sensed the importance of creating an independent network,

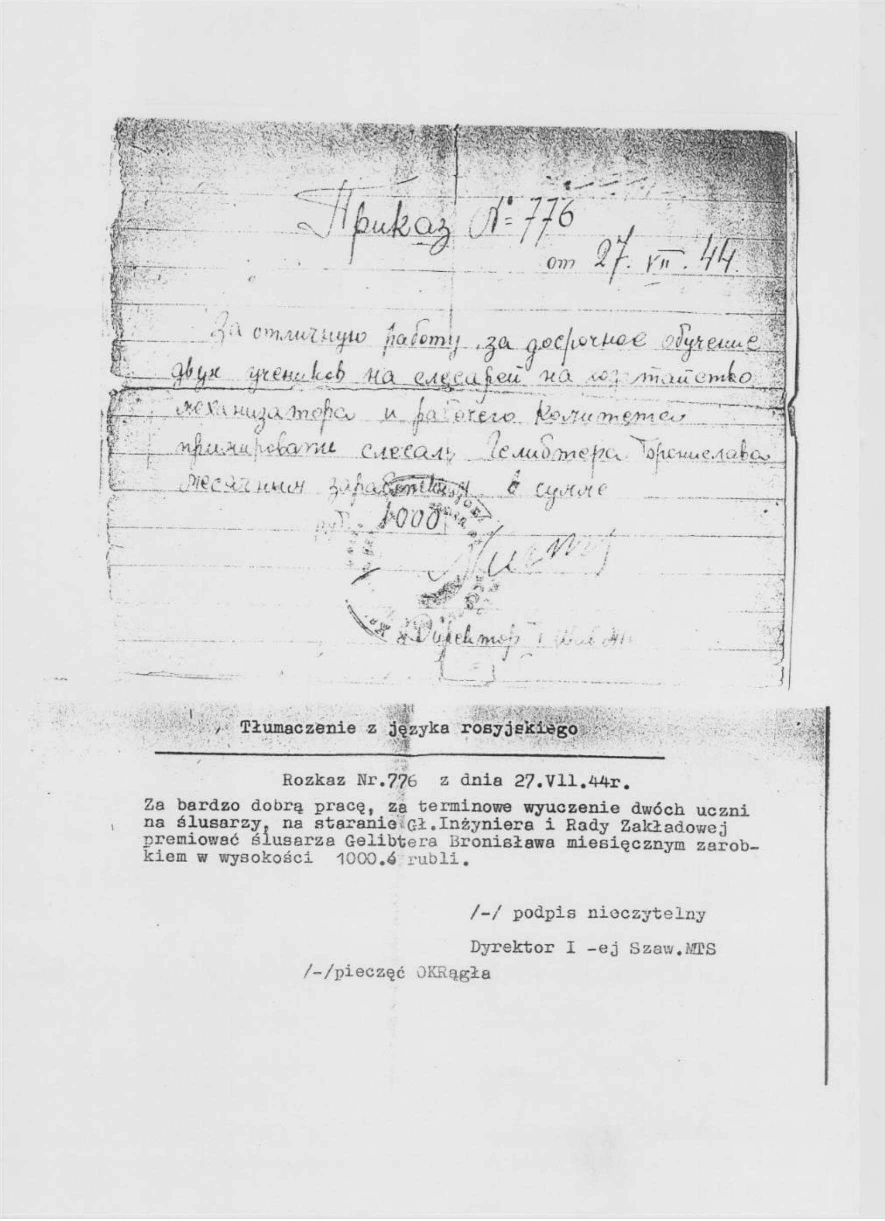
and soon multiple associations started their still ongoing work of arranging social and cultural events, taking as their vantage point the shared polish past.

Polish government propaganda stated, that the Jews left Poland freely for Israel. The Danish government feared that too much focus on the true nature of events would cause conflict and ultimately threaten those Jews still waiting to leave Poland. Thus, Danish media were asked to avoid publicizing the events. This may be one of the reasons why public knowledge of this group of refugees is still very limited today.

Appendices

1926

From left to right: Father Maks, me, oldest brother Lutek (Ludwik or Eliasz), Adaś (Adam or Adolf), Mother Regina (Riwka).



Приказ № 776
от 27. VII. 44.

За отличную работу, за досрочное обучение двух учеников на слесарей на ходатайство механизатора и рабочего комитета премировать слесаря Гелибтера Бронислава месячным заработком в сумме руб. 1000

Директор

Tłumaczenie z języka rosyjskiego

Rozkaz Nr.776 z dnia 27.V11.44r.

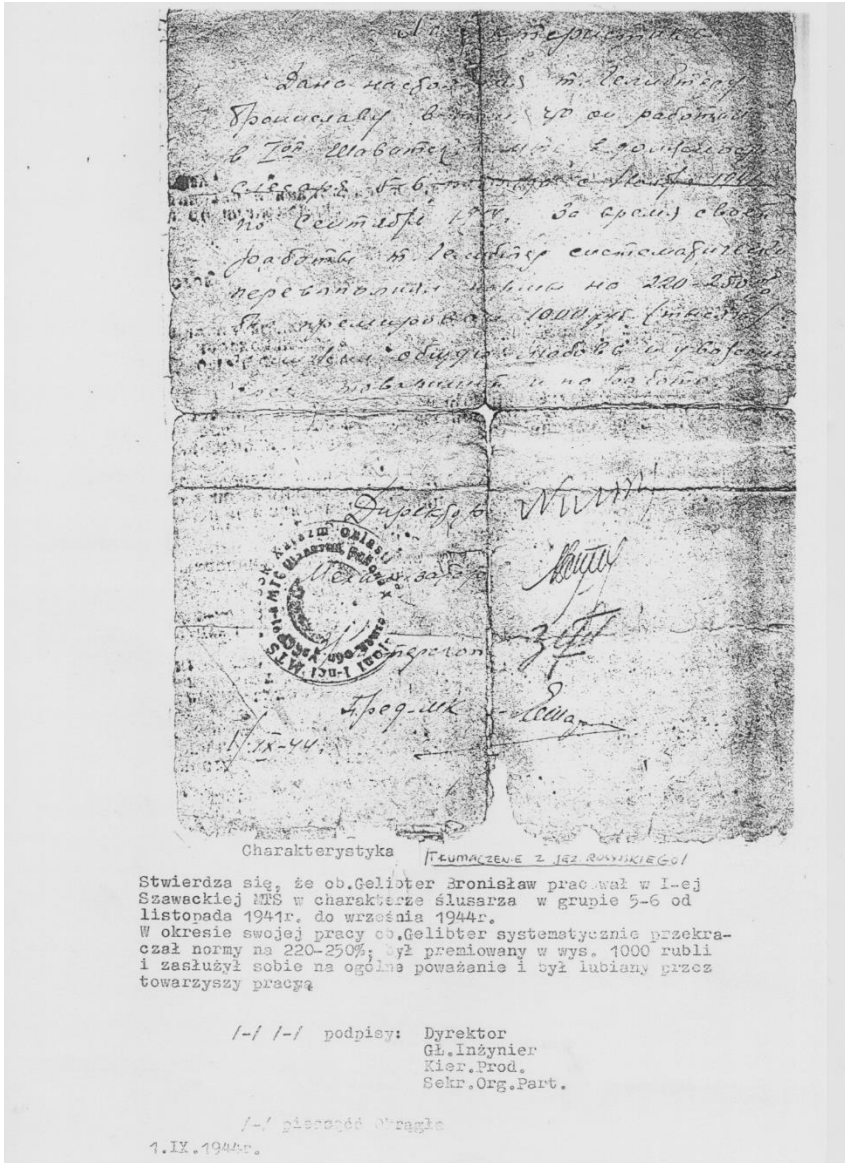
Za bardzo dobrą pracę, za terminowe wyuczenie dwóch uczni na ślusarzy, na staranie Gł.Inżyniera i Rady Zakładowej premiować ślusarza Gelibtera Bronisława miesięcznym zarobkiem w wysokości 1000.6 rubli.

/-/ podpis nieczytelny

Dyrektor I -ej Szaw.MTS

/-/pieczęć OKRągła

For very good work and timely training of two new mechanics …. mechanic Gelibter to receive an award of a month salary of 1000 rubles.



Charakterystyka

TŁUMACZENIE Z JĘZ. ROSYJSKIEGO!

Stwierdza się, że ob.Gelibter Bronisław pracował w I-ej Szawackiej MTS w charakterze ślusarza w grupie 5-6 od listopada 1941r. do września 1944r.
W okresie swojej pracy ob.Gelibter systematycznie przekraczał normy na 220-250%; był premiowany w wys. 1000 rubli i zasłużył sobie na ogólne poważanie i był lubiany przez towarzyszy pracy.

/-/ /-/ podpisy: Dyrektor
Gł.Inżynier
Kier.Prod.
Sekr.Org.Part.

/-/ pieczęć okrągła

1.IX.1944r.

This is to certify that Mr. Gelibter worked in Szawat as a mechanic from November 1941 to September 1944. In that time he systematically exceeded targets by 220 – 250%, did receive a bonus of 1000 rubles, earned general respect and was liked by his colleagues.

Выписка из Приказа 195
от 17 ноября 1944 г.
по Б. Токмакском „Райпромкомбинату"

Принять на работу в качестве
слесаря т. Гелибтера Бр. М.
по 6. разряду

Верно секр. Корош

17. ноября 1944 г.
№

Tłumaczenie z języka rosyjskiego

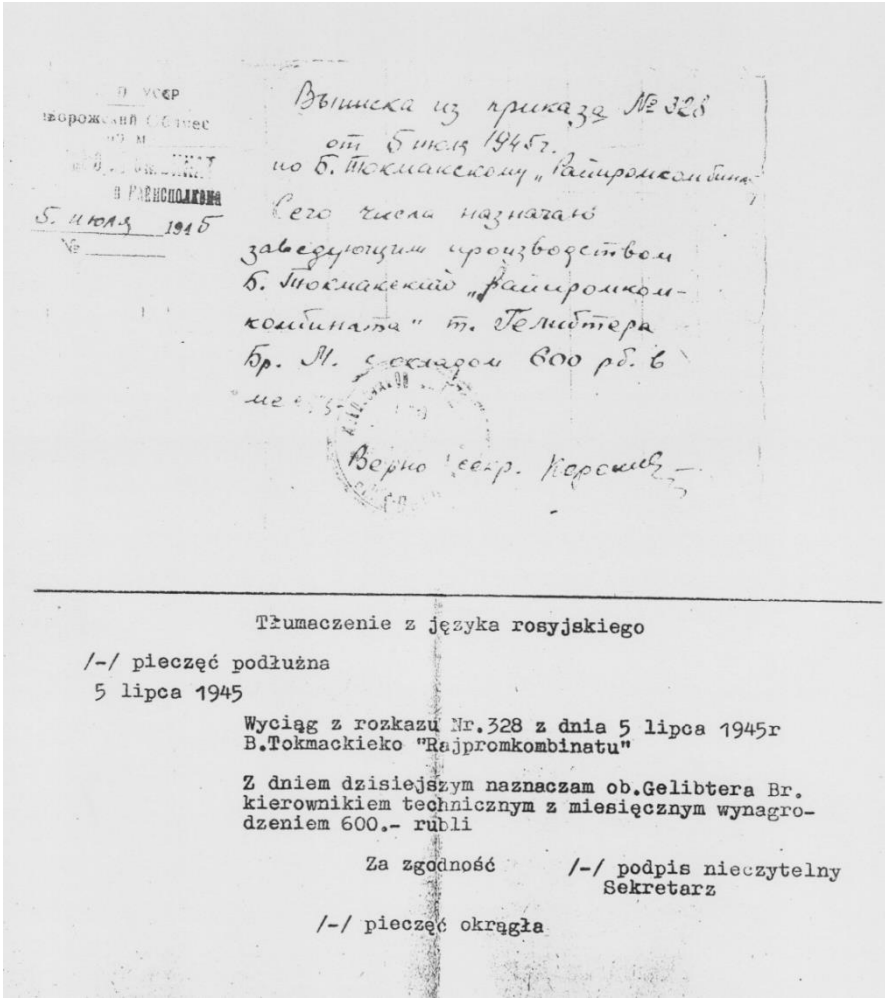
/-/ pieczęć podłużna
17.listopad 1944

Wyciąg z rozkazu Nr.~~328~~ 195 z dn.17 listopada 1944r
B.Tokmackiego "Rajpromkombinatu"

Przyjąć do pracy w charakterze ślusarza w/g grupy
6-ej ob.Gelibtera

Za zgodność /-/ podpis nieczytelny
Sekretarz

/-/ pieczęć okrągła



Tłumaczenie z języka rosyjskiego

/-/ pieczęć podłużna
5 lipca 1945

Wyciąg z rozkazu Nr.328 z dnia 5 lipca 1945r
B.Tokmackieko "Rajpromkombinatu"

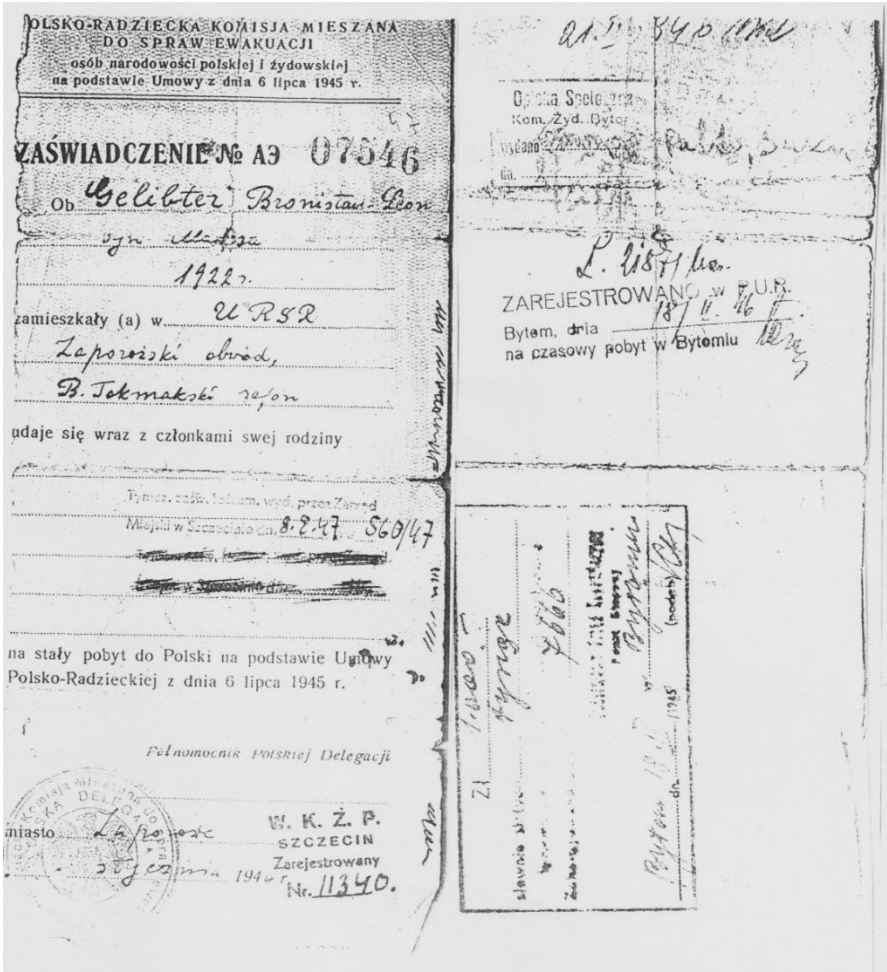
Z dniem dzisiejszym naznaczam ob.Gelibtera Br.
kierownikiem technicznym z miesięcznym wynagro-
dzeniem 600.- rubli

Za zgodność /-/ podpis nieczytelny
Sekretarz

/-/ pieczęć okrągła

5 November 1945

As of today, I appoint Mr. Gelibter to position of a technical manager with a monthly salary of 600 rubles.


POLSKO-RADZIECKA KOMISJA MIESZANA
DO SPRAW EWAKUACJI
osób narodowości polskiej i żydowskiej
na podstawie Umowy z dnia 6 lipca 1945 r.

ZAŚWIADCZENIE № AЭ 07546

Ob. Gelibter Bronisław-Leon

syn Mojsza

1922 r.

zamieszkały (a) w. URSR

Zaporoski obwód,

B. Tokmakski rejon

udaje się wraz z członkami swej rodziny

na stały pobyt do Polski na podstawie Umowy
Polsko-Radzieckiej z dnia 6 lipca 1945 r.

Pełnomocnik Polskiej Delegacji

W. K. Ż. P.
SZCZECIN
Zarejestrowany
Nr. 11340.

ZAREJESTROWANO w P.U.R.
Bytom, dnia 18/II 46
na czasowy pobyt w Bytomiu

Polish – Soviet mixed commission on issues of evacuation of people of Polish and Jewish nationality.

Permit to move from Bolshoi Tokmak in the Soviet Union to Poland.

Permit to temporary stay in Bytom issued in 1946.