ZOFIA HOFFMAN

Platoon commander Zofia Hoffman, born in 1905, Roman Catholic, married.

During the night from 12 to 13 April 1940, I was taken together with my mother, Włodzimiera Neuhoff, from her apartment in Lwów at Zadwórzańska Street 69. The name of my 18-month-old daughter was also on the list of those to be transported, but I managed to save her at the last moment and leave her in my family's care.

We were not given the reason for our removal. I was only told that I was going to join my husband, who had been interned together with a group of officers in Lwów on 22 September 1939, and then transported to Starobilsk.

My mother and I were each allowed to bring luggage weighing up to 50 kilograms. The apartment was sealed, once it had been emptied.

The transport was organized and carried out with a precision that indicated incredible efficiency at conducting operations of this sort. The conditions during transport were difficult. We were watched by guards. Groups of 30 or 40 people of both sexes and various ages were crowded into each of the locked boxcars. Sanitary facilities were primitive – virtually non-existent. The following people were in my wagon: Dr. Janina Pilat with her mother-in-law, Karolina Zbrożek, Mikołaj Cieński, engineer Mastalski with his wife and son, engineer Kujawski with his wife, the wife of a pilot, Kubin, with her daughters – aged four and two – Mrs. Kuberczyk with her son, Romanowska, Dr. Góra, Urzędowska – sister of colonel-lieutenant and military auditor Urzędowski – and a number of other people, whose names I no longer remember.

The sight of trains passing, loaded with Poles, was a shock, and seeing the heads of children who were looking out of the open windows drove us to helpless despair. And at that point we didn't even realize what struggles were still ahead of us. After two days we received our first meal. We were given food once a day, at various times of night and day.

On 1 May we were unloaded at Dzhengis-Tobe station in Kazakhstan, Semipalatinsk *oblast*, from where we were transported by trucks deep into the country – to villages, *kolkhozes*, and *sowkhozes*. I was placed with a group of 70 people in the Bustagach *kolkhoz* (zarminskyi raion). This *kolkhoz* was exclusively for Kazakhs. It was very poor and consisted of several dozen mud huts. The location wasn't too bad, since it was just 30 kilometers away from the station, five to six kilometers from the local village – Georgievka – and nine from another large settlement – Akzhal. It was difficult to find a place for us, we were settled mostly together with the local population, or in stables, unused buildings, etc. I lived together with my mother and three other ladies in a toilet area set up in a stable. We saw sheep and rams being moved elsewhere before we settled there. It was a hole with a tiny window and no floor (only packed soil), filled with the odour of cattle dung, very damp and infested with countless bugs: cockroaches, centipedes, and lice. The lice were especially terrible. One could crush 50 – 60 of them on a single bed and still there would be no visible result. There was no furniture. We slept on the damp ground and used suitcases as tables and chairs.

Two days after our arrival we were assigned to work in a *kolkhoz*. It was unskilled labor: working in stables and barns, producing the so-called *kizyak* – fuel made out of cattle dung – digging irrigation ditches, coating walls of the houses with clay, and working in the field – weeding, helping out with tractors, etc. The number of days spent at work and quotas fulfilled were documented. Wages were paid at the end of the year, which meant that we weren't paid regularly and consequently couldn't support ourselves. And yet we had to live somehow! We were obliged to pay rent, which in our building was 40 rubles per month, as well as to buy food, which we had to obtain on our own, as we weren't given any bread. We would get by on the supplies that we had brought from home, items that we sold and exchanged, and money sent by relatives back in the homeland. The standard of living was incredibly low, even though at first we did not experience hunger and cold as intensely as we would later in the winter. We especially missed bread, which we replaced with Cossack pancakes, cooked in a primitive, local manner. Droppings of the rams, which had been carefully collected on the steppes, were used as fuel. We cooked our meals on stones arranged for this very purpose. The possibility of leaving the *kolkhoz* grounds was limited – at first it required permission from the head of the camp. After several months relations improved to the extent that we could go to the neighboring *kolkhozes*, Georgievka and Akzhal, without major problems; leaving for an extended period of time or going further away was almost impossible before the amnesty.

The *kolkhoz* authorities treated us ruthlessly and scornfully. The younger generation of locals was unsympathetic, and made it clear that they thought themselves superior to us, making fun of "Polish lords" and "lordly Poland", and spewing out communist and anti-religious propaganda. Older people, who remembered former days, realized the gravity of the situation and looked at us with sympathy and a fondness of sorts, but everyone exploited us and stole the rest of our property just the same.

At the end of May, nine people were sent to work at a farm. I was among them. The farm was located in the mountains, several kilometers away from the *kolkhoz*. There were no buildings apart from three small mud huts. We were assigned a space in a stable, largely damaged, with no doors or windows. Our work involved mining, loading and transporting stones, and producing *kizyak*. Work and living conditions were very hard. Using primitive tools and no gloves, our palms very quickly turned into one big, bloody blister. Our skin was covered with cracks and cuts, which made work more difficult. We were given no food. We cooked on our own, and had to deal with the shortage of produce on our own, for there was no chance to buy anything besides goat milk. Lousy food, discomfort, physically exhausting labor carried out in the heat of the sun, and grit were rapidly ruining our strength. I got brucellosis from the sick rams while making *kizyak* with my injured hands in that time. When my exhaustion became very apparent, I was sent back to the *kolkhoz*. I labored one or two more days weeding millet, until I fainted during work in the field. This is how my short career as a *kolkhoz* worker ended and my time spent in various Soviet hospitals began. The head of the *kolkhoz* refused to provide a cart to transport me to the hospital. For some strange reason, I was also unable to hire a lift privately for money. A truck happened to be passing through on the way to Akzhal, and that's how I got to a local hospital, where I was treated surprisingly well. Bedbugs were the only nuisance I encountered during my stay. The lack of proper medicine and the means to carry out an analysis made the treatment difficult. The whole progress of the disease – high fever causing dizziness and a systematic loss of consciousness occurring at certain hours – prompted the doctor to send me to the hospital in Georgievka, which provided access to proper medical facilities. I walked from Akzhal to that *kolkhoz* (9 kilometers), as I didn't have enough money for a cart. In the *kolkhoz* I lay in bed for two weeks, waiting for the nurse who specialized in analysing brucellosis to return from leave. The following two weeks I waited for injections to arrive. The prevalent attitude in Georgievka was less sympathetic than in Akzhal. The doctor had a ruthless, hostile, and

malicious approach. He was abusive towards Poles. Because of that, and because of the hospital's primitive conditions and bedbug infestation, I was inclined to walk there to receive injections. I preferred that over the constant humiliation. The treatment was carried out carelessly. Over two and a half months, I got only three injections. All of that – along with the lousy food – explains why the disease not only did not go away, but actually turned into a chronic condition, leading me to become very sickly. I remained in this state until October. Rainy autumnal weather made it difficult to walk to the hospital, so the NKVD agreed to transfer me and my mother to Georgievka. This was no special concession, since at that time I was not expected to recover. I was rather supposed to wait for death.

The attitude of the authorities and local population in Georgievka was the same as in the *kolkhoz*, but the living conditions, both with regards to housing and food, were better. Rising prices, the impossibility of earning money, and a decrease in demand and price for the things we produced had a terrible effect on our finances. In the winter we had to face the problem of how to obtain fuel, which was horrendously expensive. During winter we were starving. Sometimes the only food we could get was soup made from mangolds and a couple of cabbage leaves. We had no bread. The situation was made worse by heavy snowstorms that lasted for weeks, blocking access to the railway station and making it impossible to get food supplies from home. This was the hardest period of our time in exile. My health deteriorated, I suffered from complications connected with the joints and neuritis in my right hand. I lost the use of one arm, and I could barely move the other. My fate would have been sealed, if not for a happy coincidence and a change of personnel, as a result of which a young, gifted female doctor and decent human being took over the management of the hospital. In March and April I received intensive treatment, because once this doctor arrived, the hospital suddenly turned out to have sufficient amounts of medicine and injections at their disposal. On top of that, the NKVD allowed for my temporary stay at a brucellosis clinic in Semipalatinsk.

Living conditions in Semipalatinsk were better. Since there was not enough space in the clinic, I was allowed to stay in a neighboring private household. On the basis of a medical certificate, the NKVD permitted me to stay there for three months. We were also assigned bread rations. Relations in the clinic weren't altogether fine. Low-ranking staff members, the so-called *medsestras* [nurses] and orderlies, were sympathetic – they even treated us with some warmth. The doctor had a different attitude. While he behaved politely, he also

thought that if the Polish state had allowed its people to fall into *rabstvo* [slavery], then Poles should be treated like *raby* [slaves] – they should be assigned very hard and dirty work, and maybe in time could rise to some better, lighter tasks. He voiced this opinion, which laid out perfectly the future that had been planned for us, when one of the nurses suggested in my presence that I be given a job helping out around the clinic. It is very telling that a doctor, who was well aware of my condition, should give an opinion which for a long time disqualified me from heavy and even slightly more demanding work. I could have been given a job and received wages, but being of Polish nationality I was instead doomed together with other exiles to conditions which would slowly lead to our extermination. Such treatment and such a moralizing tone, aimed at damaging our national pride and offending our human dignity, was an everyday occurrence for us. I can say without exaggeration that the psychological abuse to which we were subjected – often in a very brutal manner – was just as severe as our hunger and destitution.

During my treatment – or at the end of it, to be more precise – the amnesty was announced, allowing me to remain in Semipalatinsk. I worked with Ms. Zofia Sołtysik organizing the Semipalatinsk delegation, and in November 1941 I joined the Women's Auxiliary Service in Buzuluk. I was admitted and assigned to the court-martial of the command of the Polish Armed Forces in the USSR.

The following people who stayed with me in Bustagach or Georgievka have died in the USSR: Mrs Kuberczyk – the wife of a retired major – the Zimmers, a daughter of a leader of the State Police, the mother of a State Police inspector's wife named Zofia Banaś, Celina Kowalewska, Mikołaj Cieński, Prof. Rafałowski, [illegible]-years-old Hanka Szoskówna [?] (I only heard about this second-hand), Maria Przystalska, and Jadwiga Przystalska (I also learned of this from my colleagues).