



JAN ZIELSKI

1. Personal data:

Lieutenant Jan Król of the Reserve, 47 years old, secondary school teacher; wife Felicja Król, son Andrzej Wacław, both in the USSR, deported in April 1940, they are in Kazakhstan (address unknown to this day).

2. Date and circumstances of arrest:

I was arrested in Sarny (Volhynia) on 17 December 1939.

3. Name of the camp, prison, or forced labor site:

I was imprisoned in Sarny and Równe (Volhynia) until 24 March 1940. On 1 April I was taken to Kharkiv, then in August 1940 to Starobilsk, and from 6 January 1941 until the amnesty I stayed in forced labor camps no. 8, 4 and 6 in the Komi ASSR, in the settlement of Ukhta.

4. Description of the camp, prison etc.:

Camp no. 8 was a transit camp – there were a dozen or so wooden buildings, dirty and cramped; food was insufficient both in terms of quantity and quality.

Camp no. 4 was similar to camp no. 8, but it was smaller and situated on a rivulet; the barracks were better than in camp no. 8, but they were more cramped, untidy and filthy. The food was bearable at first, but deteriorated over time.

Camp no. 6 was big; it was located on a flatland, and like camp no. 8 in the middle of Komi's dense forests. It was tidier than the previous camps; the food was insufficient, especially for those who worked.

5. The composition of prisoners of war, inmates, exiles:

The composition of inmates in all the above enumerated prisons and camps was more or less the same: some Poles, many Ukrainians and Carpathian Ruthenians, a few Russians, quite a lot of Jews.

As for the crimes committed by them, the majority were so-called political prisoners, while in some prisons (for instance in prison no. 5 in Kharkiv, "Chłodna Góra", that is camp no. 4), those sentenced for illegal border crossing constituted a large percentage. Relatively few were imprisoned for common crimes (thieves etc.).

On average, the intellectual and moral standing of the convicts was very low. The mutual relations varied, depending on the composition of prisoners or camp inmates. Sometimes they were unbearable (as in camp no. 4, overflowing with Carpathian Ruthenians – thefts, squabbles, even brawls were a common occurrence).

6. Life in the camp, prison:

a) Life in the prisons was unbearable (Równe, and especially Kharkiv). Strict regulations and ruthless prison guards could make every day unpleasant for prisoners, and even without that each and every day was hard and monotonous: early wake-up, breakfast, cleaning the cell and awful boredom, as nothing was allowed (reading, writing, even loud conversation – as in Równe and Kharkiv, prison no. 5 and the NKVD prison). After dinner we waited for supper, and in the meantime – not every day (as the cells were overcrowded) – we had a 10-minute walk, then a roll call (*proverka*) in the evening and time to sleep. Such was the dull daily routine of a prisoner.

b) We had more freedom in the camps, but we had to wake up earlier and work hard to meet very high quotas, which were demanding especially for the malnourished members of the intelligentsia who weren't used to physical work. In camp no. 6 I worked at felling trees, and in camp no. 4 at roadworks. We worked in groups known as brigades, and we had to toil even if the temperatures dropped to minus 40 degrees Celsius. The quotas were so high that despite all my efforts, during my work in the forest only once did I manage to meet 100 percent of the quota, and that only thanks to a coincidence: the lot that fell to my group (of five people) was exceptionally sparse, and moreover the trees were very thin.

During roadworks (cutting ice and shoveling snow), our utmost efforts led to meeting 20–25 percent of the prescribed quota.

The working hours were prolonged when needed – for instance in camp no. 4, they were extended from 10 to 12 and more hours per day.



We received small wages (once I earned 7 rubles for ten days), and food depended on meeting the prescribed quota, and was correspondingly better or worse.

The clothes were quite decent (warm shoes and clothes, winter hats and gloves).

Social life was sometimes good, depending on the group one found oneself in, but in many cases the very harsh living conditions made mutual relations difficult, and so all vices such as egotism, greed, jealousy etc. got the upper hand even with intelligent and overall decent people. It was a fight for a piece of bread, a place on the pallet, better soup, a spoon of kasha or a better bit of fish – a fight for life.

Despite these conditions, there were examples of warm friendship and true comradeship. But it also – and probably more often – happened otherwise.

7. The NKVD's attitude towards Poles:

The NKVD was distrustful and suspicious of us Poles. This resulted in beating prisoners, incarcerating them in the punishment cell, and threatening them in various nasty ways. They didn't miss a single opportunity to pick on Poles for – usually made-up – sins and to inculcate them with Communist ideology. In Kharkiv (investigative prison of the NKVD, relatively good conditions) there wasn't a single book for the prisoners to read from time to time that wasn't filled with Communist propaganda.

8. Medical assistance, hospitals, mortality rate:

At face value, the medical assistance was quite well organized, but taking into account the influx of prisoners and lack of many medicaments, it was absolutely insufficient. It also depended on the doctors. Generally, prisoner doctors were more sympathetic toward the sick and those in need of help, as for instance Dr. Kessling from Warsaw in camp no. 6, who was a great friend of the sick and alleviated their pain or even saved their lives.

Each camp had a sick room or a little hospital (in camp no. 6, there was a hospital with 30 beds run by Dr. Kessling).

In the prisons, there were daily doctor's visits – with the exception of prison no. 5 in Kharkiv, where a doctor was a rare sight – and in more serious cases the sick were taken elsewhere for further examination.



The so-called *slabosilka* – a partial release from work for some period of time and assignment for better food (second caldron etc.) – which could be issued by a doctor – was of great help to the camp inmates. It saved the enfeebled and the sick. Nevertheless, mortality was rather high. For instance in camp nos. 6, 11 or 12 people died within two and a half months (I was an eyewitness to this, as at the time I was sick and stayed in the camp hospital). Unfortunately, I remember only two surnames: Officer Cadet Brunon Lutoborski, 32 years old, a lawyer from Bydgoszcz; and Józef Krupa, a chauffeur from Lwów, thirty-something years old.

9. Was there any possibility of getting in contact with one's country and family?

There wasn't any contact with the home country and family in the prisons, and in the camps some people (almost exclusively Poles or Polish citizens) received food parcels from their families as well as some scant news. The vast majority didn't have any contact with their country or their families.

10. When were you released and how did you manage to join the army?

I was released from camp no. 6 (Komi ASSR, Ukhta hamlet) in the second half of September 1941, and then I came in a transport through Kotlas to Buzuluk, where I applied to and was enlisted into the Polish Army on 1 October 1941.

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