

MICHAŁ RUMELT

Rifleman Michał Rumelt, aged 29, salesman, unmarried.

Arrested by the NKVD on 25 October 1939 for trading in Stanisławów. My interrogation took place in the prison in Stanisławów. It lasted nearly two months. The conditions in the prison were bad in every respect, e.g. the food, hygiene and medical assistance. The latter was nearly nonexistent. In the cell, I was surrounded by diverse social classes and nationalities – Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Ruthenians from Zakarpattia. Life in the cell was tense because of the Ukrainians, the reason for that being their hate toward the Poles and Jews, in which they were supported by the Ruthenians from Zakarpattia. In addition, they would turn informers. The fact that they often received rewards such as cigarettes, bread, and soup, served to prove that. Nobody else was lucky enough to obtain such luxuries from the prison authorities.

During the first days of December I was transported from Stanisławów to Kiev. The transport took place in terrible conditions: hunger, cold, and dirt. The journey in the unheated freight cars took 10 days. It took so long because one of our fellow prisoners managed to escape from the transport somewhere between Tarnopol and Złoczów. The convoy made a lot of noise about that. After the escape had been noticed, we were all interrogated one by one on the spot. Everyone would explain that they had been asleep (as it happened at night) and that we couldn't be held responsible for someone else's actions. They were angry at us for letting a Pole escape and kept us without food for a few days. To our protests about not getting enough bread, the head of the convoy would reply that he didn't have enough supplies to last so many days. During the transport, I was surrounded by Poles and Jews, most of them were militaries. We coexisted in agreement.

On the second day after arriving at the prison in Kiev, we were again interrogated about the escape. We were accused of helping a Polish officer escape. As I had understood from the interrogation, he was an officer of the Polish Army, apparently from Warsaw.

The NKVD's method of interrogation in that prison was more or less the following: I was taken into a darkened room, in which there were several men from the NKVD. Having written down the general information, they started asking questions, one after the other, so that I had to be quick with my answers. If that didn't help, they would threaten me with shooting, etc. Finally, when that didn't help either, they would incarcerate me in the punishment cell for a few hours. The punishment cell was quite unpleasant: it was a tiny room, a kind of a narrow box, so it was impossible to walk or sit, one could only stand in place. I was released from that cage after a few hours.

One hundred to one hundred and twenty people were placed in one cell, so there wasn't enough air and it was hard to breathe. Fortunately, that didn't last for long. After staying in Kiev for four days, we were transported to Kherson, in somewhat better conditions. We were joined by a second transport from Lwów, with the State Police from Lwów, militaries and merchants. After separating the State Police officers, soldiers and civilians, food supplies for four days were divided among us and we were taken to the freight station, where we were loaded onto the prison railcars (the officers – separately). 12 to 14 people were put in one compartment. After 48 hours, we arrived in Kherson (the officers were abandoned somewhere along the way). We walked through the town from the station to the prison in a tight line and under heavy escort, which attracted a large number of curious townspeople.

Having arrived at the prison, we were separated into groups again. There were also Soviet soldiers among us. We found out that they came from Lwów, and had committed various crimes, including theft, robbery, robbery-motivated murders, drunkenness, desertion or harmful propaganda on our territory. For example one former Soviet prisoner (as he recounted) was given a death penalty that was exchangeable for eight years in a labor camp for harmful propaganda. During a conversation with a worker in Lwów, when asked about the price of a bicycle in Russia, he answered that it cost about 800 – 1000 rubles. The conversation was accidentally (?) overheard by one of the Soviet military policemen, who arrested him on the spot. He was convicted of harmful propaganda and counterrevolution. We learned many things of the kind from those former soldiers.

After being held for a month at the prison in Kherson, we were sent to a labor camp in the north. The journey took one month until we reached the station Kandalaksha (by the White Sea). From there, we were forced to continue our journey on foot, as there was no

rail transport. My destination was 104 kilometers away, almost at the Finnish border. On the way we learned that the Finnish-Soviet war was in progress (in February 1940). There were very severe frosts there at the time, dropping to minus 45 degrees Celsius. We encountered frozen corpses of militaries and civilians on the way. The conditions were terrible, we walked regardless of the weather, day and night. Several thousand people were urged on like that, hungry and cold, the healthy and the sick. Those who were more seriously ill would be left at the wayside, with no bread, no water and no fire. In such conditions fire was crucial, it was a matter of life and death, so whoever got left behind is definitely no longer among the living. After a few days' walking we reached our destination.

The conditions in the camps were harsh, we were forced to meet the work quota. An iron road was being built in the direction of the border. People were freezing over while they were sleeping at night, mortality was relatively very high. People were dying from hunger and from the cold.

Having spent three months at those camps, I was sent to the labor camp in the Karelo-Finnish taiga. Same conditions, the only difference being that by then it was summer. In December, we were sent to yet another iron road construction, to the Northern Caucasus, to the Republic of Azerbaijan, that is near the Persian border (Iran). The living conditions in those camps were a little better. I stayed there until my release, that is until 22 September 1941. When I was released, I was directed to the town of Saratov. I arrived at my destination on 30 September. On the same day, I reported to the Command of the 5th Infantry Division in Tatishchevo, where I was enlisted into the Polish Army.