

FELIKS SARKOWSKI

Feliks Sarkowski, private, Casualty Clearing Station No. 3.

Our ordeal – that is the ordeal suffered by me and my family – began with the entry of Soviet troops into Polish territory. At that time I lived with my family in Brześć on the Bug River.

Following the introduction of their policies, I became chronically unemployed, so I was constantly at the risk of them visiting my house, threatening to arrest me and, potentially, deporting me to Siberia (“to the white bears” as they called it). On 10 February 1940, I witnessed a group of settlers being arrested: a huge transport of several cargo train cars stood on the siding of the train station in Brześć on the Bug River, and no one was allowed to give these people anything to eat or drink. The children and the elderly were the first to die of hunger. They were dealt with quickly: simply dumped from the train cars into the snow.

A few months my family and I shared the same fate. We were deported to Siberia, following our refusal to accept Soviet passports. We were put in small cargo train cars, 40 or more people per car. On our way to Siberia, we were treated with inhumane cruelty: we were shut in those cars with no food and not a drop of drinking water being provided. Thus we traveled for weeks. If anyone did manage to somehow open the train car, they were taken away and beaten up in some corner.

I was deported to the distant Novosibirsk Oblast, specifically to the Zyryanskoye Raion – all the way past Tomsk and Asino. We travelled by train to the final station in Asino and were then transferred to cargo barges (200 and more people per barge). For two days we sailed up the Chulym River, then disembarked and camped next to the river for seven or eight days. Finally, we were loaded onto trucks and driven a day’s journey into the taiga. Upon arrival at our destination, we met Russian prisoners; we lived together with them for quite some time and were treated the same as them.

Here we had another taste of the Soviet methods: we were sent to labor in the forest, with work quotas so high that no one could meet them, and received such a meager pay that one man working a full day could earn just a bowl of thin soup. Beyond that he’d go hungry or – if he was of the wealthier sort – had to sell his last shirt for extra food.

Given this state of affairs, we grew disgruntled and some attempted a mass escape into the taiga. The authorities gave chase and even opened fire on the escapees, but only a few people were wounded and none killed. Once all of them were caught, a few of the younger ones who were resisting were put under arrest. They were also beaten and even savagely kicked – I saw this myself.

During my 15-month stay in the taiga, I did some patriotic work with a few of my fellow inmates, meaning I attempted to keep our colleagues' morale up to help them get through this terrible time. Due to this, I was subject to various forms of reprisal from the local authorities. Not a week went by without them calling me into the camp command office and these visits always took place at night. An NKVD man would come, wake me up rather crassly and haul me off to said office. There, I was subjected to questioning of various sorts, which obviously included the use of beatings and threats of separation from my family. After such an examination I would usually return to my place dejected and sometimes also physically bruised. A few days later, just as I was starting to regain my spirits, the whole thing would repeat. This lasted all the way till September 1941.

In October [1941], I resolved to flee from this hell into the taiga with my wife and two minor children; we set out together with a few other families from this settlement. I made a small, hand-drawn sleigh, put the kids on it and set out on foot into the taiga. My goal was to reach the nearest train station, Asino, which was well over a hundred kilometers away from the settlement we lived in. On the way the bitter cold was hard to bear, as it went even below minus 50 degrees. I passed few settlements so we – that is both me and the kids – had to spend most nights in the untamed taiga.

I got to Uzbekistan. There, we were sent to work in the kolkhozes and the ordeal began all over again: large work quotas and meager pay, such that an adult working a full day received 200 [?] grams of some sort of grain if they met the quota set by the foreman. Under such conditions people obviously starved to death and were decimated by various infectious diseases.

This lasted until 1 August [1942?], when I was registered to travel to Iran and my family finally left that detestable [Soviet] land. Today I am happy that I can do my bit to help rebuild our precious home country.