

ALOJZY WISZNIOWSKI

Personal data (name, surname, rank, age, occupation, marital status):

Alojzy Wiszniowski, second lieutenant, aged 29, trained veterinarian, married.

Date and circumstances of arrest:

I escaped Soviet captivity on 20 October 1939 and returned to Lwów. Here, I undertook the task of smuggling Poles out of the country so they could go where duty called them. Because my parents lived in Śniatyn (near the border with Romania), I knew places that I could use to hide people. I knew the border area very well because that was where I was born and grew up. And so I set to work.

I would usually meet all the officers and discuss our plans as necessary at General Bałaban's flat. I was always the only one who knew the smuggling route and never let anyone in on the secret, fearing that such a confidant could then be captured and tell on me during interrogation. Two and a half months in, I could almost feel the NKVD breathing down my neck, I was mentally exhausted and entertained thoughts of fleeing the country myself but ultimately did not do so, thinking that if I crossed the border, no one else would be able to do it afterwards because it was very heavily guarded. I continued my work.

On the night of 1/2 December 1940, I smuggled a group of Poles that included Lieutenant Colonel Fudakowski (now in London), Captain Nieć (notary in Katowice), prosecutor Nowotny, P. Kornreich (currently in New York) and some others, whose names I do not remember. Because there was a light snowfall, we left a trail of footprints and the NKVD used tracking dogs to connect these footprints to my parents' house. I was arrested along with my whole family. In the end, the Soviets didn't obtain any actual information – no one admitted to anything despite the fact that the interrogation included beatings and the interrogators taking shots at me and my brother while we stood with our backs to them. As a result, my brother and I were both taken to Russia and sentenced to five years of penal hard labor, while my parents were deported to Semipalatinsk.

Name of the camp (prison – forced labor site):

Internment in prisons in Poland: Śniatyn, Stecowa (village), Czortków. Internment in Russia: Kirov, Balta, Kharkov and Arkhangelsk. From Arkhangelsk I was sent to Kozhva – we travelled on a cargo ship through the White Sea, Arctic Ocean, and the Pechora River. Then, the 3,000 of us in that transport were force marched in the direction of Komi and assigned work on constructing a railway that was supposed to connect Kanin Nos with Irkut [?]. I remained on that assignment until my release from forced labor.

Description of the camp, prison, etc. (grounds, buildings, living conditions, hygiene):

The biggest brick building in every Russian town is the prison. It is usually located on the outskirts and the road connecting it to the rest of the town is restricted, i.e., for use only by the NKVD and possibly the *militsiya* [police]. It is surrounded by a high wall and a lot of empty space. There are observation towers on the corners of the wall, from which the prison guards can watch the goings on both inside and outside the prison. Should anyone ever approach the wall, they would be shot dead without warning by one of the prison guards on duty.

Every prison has a section of the courtyard that the prisoners can use for walks (being given 5 or 10 minutes of walk time a day, depending on the prisoner's behavior). Each prison also has adjoining latrines which the prisoners are allowed to use twice a day – they're escorted there cell by cell. Some prisons also have medical clinics.

The living conditions and hygiene leave much to be desired. We were prohibited from opening the windows, which were also boarded up so tightly that not a ray of sun could squeeze into the cell. We weren't even allowed to approach the windows: the guard on duty in the corridor would periodically look into the cell through the peephole – if he caught anyone standing too close to a window, that prisoner would be punished. The worst prison punishment was spending time in punitive solitary confinement. The next worst was loss of meals.

The sanitary and general living conditions in labor camps could sometimes be worse than in prison. All the prisoners were marched out of the camp and pressured into working by various means. They lived in dugouts or – if the camp was near a forest – in wooden cabins they'd built themselves. Such a camp was called a "colony." It was surrounded by barbed wire or a wicker fence. The perimeter was a square or rectangle, with observation towers

on each of the corners – to reach the top of a tower, one had to climb a ladder. Each tower would be occupied day and night by an NKVD man and their job was to ensure that no one would escape. Approaching the camp fence could result in being immediately shot dead without warning.

The composition of POWs, prisoners, exiles (nationality, category of crimes, intellectual and moral standing, mutual relations, etc.):

The deportee-prisoners were of various nationalities. Poles were the most common, followed by various USSR citizens, Romanians, Lithuanians, Latvians and Czechs. From the Bolshevik point of view, all the deportees were members of the most dangerous criminal category, i.e., political prisoners. All were considered spies with hardened political opinions and thus to be treated without mercy – worse than one would treat a dog – and ultimately destroyed so that not even a trace would remain. Mutual relations between prisoners varied. The Poles developed the strongest friendships among themselves, such that if one was sick, another would do the sick man's work as best he could. The worst relations in the camps were the ones between the Poles and Russian citizens. The Russian deportees came from varied social strata (both members of the intelligentsia and the working class) and they would argue and fight amongst themselves incessantly. Initially, their attitude to the Poles was openly hostile and improved significantly only much later, once the Russians concluded that the communist propaganda was all a lie.

Life in the camp or prison (daily routine, work conditions, quotas, wages, food, clothing, social and cultural life, etc.):

To a Polish deportee, each day in the labor camp was like a year of misery. It began with the wake-up call at 4.00 a.m., when everyone had to get up quickly and rush to the kitchen to get their meal (which was water with a drop of flour or a handful of groats in it). By 5.00 a.m. everyone had to stand in front of the gate and line up according to their work brigades, from whence they would be escorted by an NKVD man to the worksite outside the camp. Dinner – which was similar to breakfast in quality – would be issued around 1.00 p.m. and the prisoners would be sent back to work immediately after eating it. The workday ended around 8.00 p.m., when the prisoners were escorted by the same NKVD men back to their camps (colonies).

At work each prisoner was obligated to meet a rather high labor quota, which was basically impossible to do with food so meager – consisting mostly of water in the morning and in the afternoon, followed by a piece of salted fish for supper – and the deportees being already exhausted. Groups of prisoners would frequently be kept at work till midnight, until dawn or even continuously for a few days and nights in a row. This was done to achieve both labor quota fulfillment and prisoner morale degradation. The only foodstuff given to all the deportees was bread – different amounts were issued to the prisoners depending on percentages of labor quota fulfillment.

Deportee clothing consisted of a padded shirt and pants, a hat, an undershirt, a pair of long johns and shoes. The summer shoes were made from pig skin and the winter ones out of fur. It is hard to describe all the aspects of the deportee-prisoner clothing and food situation concisely. In general, the food was so lacking that our bodies had to rely on themselves to survive. Once all of his strength was gone, the prisoner would die of exhaustion; death was usually preceded by one of the common illnesses, such as scurvy or dysentery. Our clothing was mostly old and tattered, and infested with countless lice that spread diseases.

There was simply no cultural life whatsoever in the penal labor camps.

The NKVD's attitude towards Poles (interrogation methods, torture and other forms of punishment, Communist propaganda, information about Poland, etc.):

The primary tools employed by the Bolsheviks in the questioning process were barrages of insults and conducting the sessions at night. The second one was important because we were prohibited from sleeping during the day, which meant that a prisoner interrogated in this nighttime fashion would be under tremendous strain, eventually have a nervous breakdown, and confess whatever the NKVD wanted. Another method involved an interrogator asking the prisoner the same thing over and over, then passing them on to a second interrogator, then a third and fourth one, etc. Such a chain interrogation lasted a few hours and during this time the prisoner was not allowed to move – they had to remain in their assigned position. At the end of the session, the interrogators would convene and jointly present their conclusions. During the interrogation, the subjects were beaten mercilessly, leading them to admit to completely outlandish things. Another torture technique involved turning the prisoner's stool upside down, forcing him to sit down on just

one stool leg and having him remain like that until the end of the session. In the process of interrogation, the subjects were often beaten with rubber truncheons and sometimes they would even be shot at: the prisoner would be told to turn his face to the wall and the interrogator would fire at a point above his head from behind. This was intended to intimidate the prisoner into telling the NKVD the truth. At other times, they would attempt to bribe the subjects, even going so far as to offer them some sort of position if they admitted to whatever they were being charged with.

Communist propaganda was rather intense both in the prisons and in the labor camps. The Soviets sought to convince us that people lived the best lives possible under Bolshevik rule, whereas the workers in Poland (forced to eat boiled nettles) or in Romania (on a diet of cooked grass and weeds) led a miserable existence under the boot of the capitalist class. This message was propagated by means of illustrated books depicting, for example, a peasant couple pulling a plow while being whipped by a "fat bourgeois man," i.e. a capitalist. The propaganda was, of course, completely ineffectual. Polish prisoners would use open discussion periods to explicitly prove the falsity of these propagandist assertions, risking time in a punishment cell, solitary confinement or even beatings. In conversations with the imprisoned Soviet workers, the Poles eventually managed to convince the Russians that the propaganda consisted of utter lies. Relevantly, some of these Russian workers had firsthand experience that proved as much: they'd taken part in the initial invasion of Poland and spent some time there, witnessing the relative wealth. Indeed, quite a few of them ended up in prison and in the labor camps precisely because – after a good meal and one too many drinks – they began praising this abundance of relatively inexpensive goods which they had no way of getting in Russia. Once these heretical opinions reached the NKVD, the incautious soldiers ended up in the same camps as the Poles. Relations between the Poles and the imprisoned Soviet citizens were initially extremely hostile. With time, after many conversations and discussions, they warmed up to us. One could even say that workers and members of the lower social classes became supportive. The attitude of the NKVD towards Poles, in contrast, did not change one bit – it remained unrelentingly hostile up to the very end.

Medical assistance, hospitals, mortality rate (provide the names of the deceased):

In principle, each camp had a health clinic under the supervision of some doctor or paramedic and the prisoners were allowed to consult them as needed. However, medical supplies were severely lacking: there was hardly anything besides cotton swabs and iodine. Leg or arm edema, stomach upset, tooth pain or headache were not considered sufficient causes for sick leave. To be relieved from work, the patient had to have a body temperature of over 38.5 degrees.

A single colony would house 800 to 1,000 prisoners and each group of a few colonies had its designated local hospital to which severely ill patients were sent. But by the time this referral was given, the patient was usually in such a bad shape that they died on the way. Thus, hospitals served more as cemeteries, i.e., places where the arrivals were buried. It must be said, though, that if anyone did make it to the hospital alive, they were provided far better food and living conditions than in the camp. Overall, mortality was quite high. The camp I was in housed around 500 Poles, of which around 100 died during the first winter. This was the deadliest season of that period, which is perfectly understandable considering the poor food without any fats, the common occurrence of frostbite, etc. In the summer mortality was significantly lower: only around 50 Poles died then. However, the second winter season was much more deadly – of the initial number of 500 Poles only around 150 were still alive by the end of it. This was, again, completely unsurprising: during the first winter period people were being kept alive by the fat and energy their bodies had stored up while still in Poland. I can no longer recall the names of the deceased Poles.

Was there any possibility to get in contact with one's country and family?

There was no contact with any family or with the home country. We were technically allowed to write letters, but they were not sent out. Instead, they were destroyed.

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

After the signing of the Polish-Soviet pact, the NKVD authorities informed us that all Poles would be granted amnesty. At the beginning of September 1941, they collected all the Poles interned in the vicinity of Irkutsk [?] – which included me – and sent us by train to the Kanin Nos river port on the Pechora River. There, we were all issued certificates of release that explicitly stated we were released Polish citizens. Before the release, each Pole was individually asked whether they wanted to join the Polish army, the Soviet army

or remain and work in Russia. A small number of Polish citizens agreed to either stay and work in Russia or join the Soviet army, but an overwhelming majority refused. A transport of Poles left the region in the first half of September 1941, going in the direction of Buzuluk after crossing the Pechora River; the group was headed by Lieutenant Colonel Świątkowski (currently in charge of OZE [Reserve Center?]) and Lieutenant Colonel Idzik (currently probably in Africa). From Buzuluk we traveled to Totskoye – this is where I joined the Polish army on 19 September 1941, along with the other Poles. I was assigned to the Army Reserve Center and on 2 October 1941 I was reassigned as a junior veterinarian to the 18th Infantry Regiment of the 6th Infantry Division.

Unit: Convalescent Home of the Polish Armed Forces in the East