

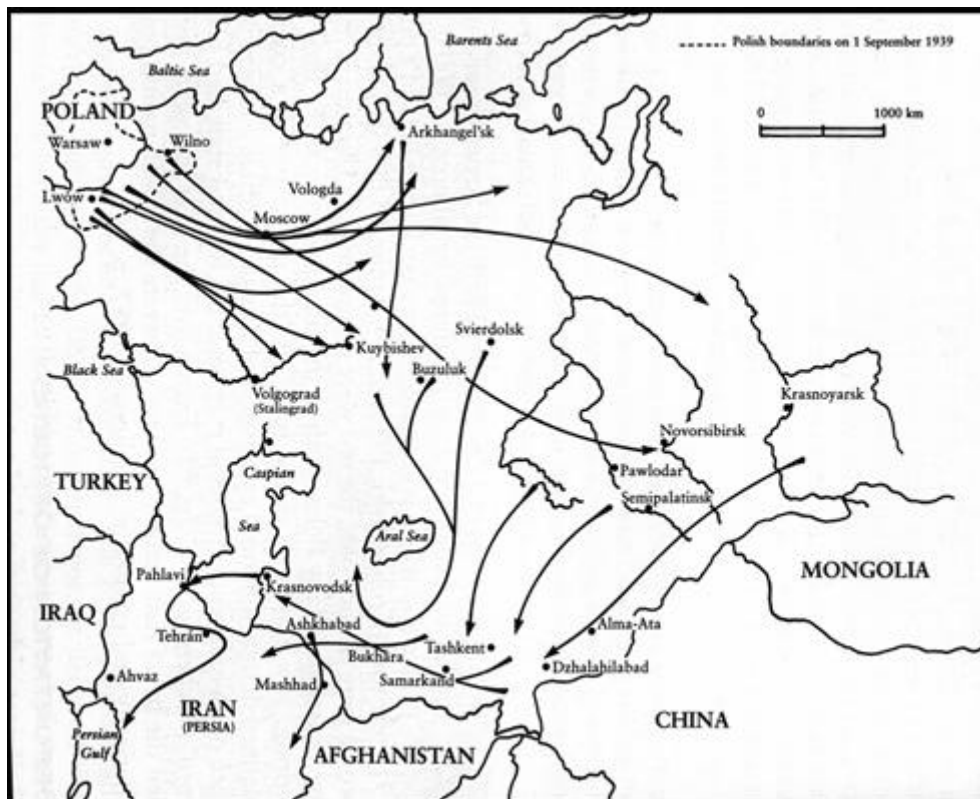
The General Langfitt Story

Chapter 2 - Deportation

After the invasion of 17 September 1939, the Soviet Union proceeded to annex territory inhabited by almost 13 000 000 people and which constituted more than half of Poland's post 1918 territory (Królikowski, 1983, p.17). Around 5000 000 of these people were ethnic Poles, the rest were predominantly Ukrainians and Byelorussians. Many Poles, both at the time and even at the time of writing, saw this 'stab in the back' as 'the realisation of a coldly planned design, a natural expression of Russia's attitude to the existence of an independent Poland ever since the Russian state had been born' (Ascherson, 1987, p. 92). Events over the next few years justified the belief that Stalin hoped to 'obliterate the Polish nation both physically and culturally' (Ascherson, 1987, p. 94).

Deportation of Officers

The Soviet authorities carried out an immediate round of deportations and arrests, principally of Polish leaders and those in government posts. In 1948 the Ministry of justice in London estimated that 200 000 Polish soldiers were arrested between 1939 and 1940, with at least 180 000 ending up as Soviet prisoners of war. A further 25 000 were forcibly drafted into the Soviet army, or taken as forced labour (Ministry of Justice, 1949). More recent figures suggest that over the remaining months of 1939, the Red Army rounded up an estimated quarter of a million Polish army personnel and transported them to the USSR (Walters, 1988, pp. 275-6).



Approximate routes of the Polish exiles, 1939-42 (Adapted from Fr Lucjan Królikowski's book *Stolen Childhood*, 1983)

Out of that total, between 12 000 and 15 000 officers were interned in camps near Katyn, Ostaskow and Starobel'sk. Relatives received intermittent letters from them until the spring of 1940. The occupying German army in April 1943 discovered the Katyn officers in a forest graveyard. According to Ascherson (1987, p. 123), no trace of the 4000 officers at the Starobel'sk camp nor the 6500 prisoners at Ostaskow has yet been found. Although Polish research in the post communist years is bringing to light more information about localities where NKVD (the secret police, now known as the KGB) victims, including Polish officers, were 'buried', nothing appears to have been published in English. The silence and uncertainty which surrounded the fate of these Polish officers left an enduring, if often understated, impact upon their friends and relatives. Stanisława Jutrzenka-Trzebiatowska (Adamska), whose husband had joined the army three months before war was declared, summarised the events surrounding his disappearance with simple candour:

I received a note from my husband from Rostov, in Russia, where he was taken with other members of the Polish army. The note was brought to me by a man who came back from Russia. The ordinary soldiers came home but all the others were kept in the Soviet Union. I received only one more letter from him asking for boots and a belt. I found out that he was dead after I arrived in Australia. My brother sent me a book from Poland with all the names of those killed, *Lista Katynska*, which I still have. My husband's name is there, Henryk Adamski.

Similarly, Helena Lancucka, a school teacher who had been born in southern Poland in 1904 but had moved to Polesie in eastern Poland with her husband, recalled:

Life was very unsettled in Poland before the war. My husband was called up before war started, so he was already on the front when war started. He said it was a very dangerous time and that I should stay together with my family - my Mum and my sister - because he had to go to the army. In February 1940 I had a letter from my husband saying that he was in Kosielsk camp. We sent a letter to that address but never got an answer. My husband was killed in Katyn. For a long time I did not know.

The disappearance of the Polish officers had no less an impact upon their children, even if they were very young at the time. The account given by Bogdan Harbuz, who was only a boy of 6 when war broke out, hints at a persisting sense of injustice and disbelief shared by many of the participants whose fathers 'disappeared' during the war:

During World War One, my father was an officer in the Polish army, so in the inter-war period he was a reservist. Just before World War Two started he was called up. First he went to Warsaw as general staff but when the general staff started being evacuated across the border he stayed in Poland as a front line officer. He was taken prisoner by the Russians, and marched to a place called Kozel'sk. There were three prisoner of war camps for Polish officers: Kozel'sk, Starobel'sk and Ostaskow. For the first few months he was allowed to send letters to us in Poland. Then, when we were taken to Siberia in April 1940, we lost contact with our father altogether.

In 1942 the Polish government in exile asked Stalin what happened to the officers but he could not give any definite answer. Then the Germans uncovered the mass graves in Katyn so at that time we found out that between some 12 000 and 15 000 Polish officers were executed by a revolver bullet to the back of the head. But we only found out after the war that our father was murdered there. For many years, even after the war, I still could not believe it - not until I saw his name on the list of officers that were killed there.

As the Red Army focused its attention on the 1939 'Winter War' in Finland, there was a pause in the deportations while a 'sovietisation' of Polish institutions was carried out. Rigged elections took place in November which produced dummy assemblies of Ukrainians and Byelorussians who voted unanimously for their incorporation into the Soviet Union. There was some land reform and nationalisation, and Poles were removed from official posts and often from their own homes.

By February 1940, Stalin turned his attention to Poland once again as the need to secure his western front became more pressing. Polish families in the occupied zones were driven from their homes and packed into unheated cattle trucks which slowly headed for Siberia and the Soviet far east. Figures produced by the Ministry of Justice in London in 1949 suggested that around 1660 000 Polish soldiers and civilians were deported to the USSR (*Stalin and the Poles*, Ministry of Justice, London 1949).

With the gradual opening up of Soviet archives since 1989, figures are being revised by Polish scholars. Zofia Ciesielska, in a 1992 article, cites the following as more accurate, but still tentative, estimations. Approximately 12 000 Poles were interned in camps in Latvia before being transported to the USSR. Under the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact 210 000-230 000 Polish citizens were automatically considered Soviet citizens and were incorporated into the Soviet Army in 1940-41. According to various sources, between 250 000-350 000 Polish civilians were arrested between 1939 and 1941 and were taken to *gulags*, hard labour camps throughout Siberia, Kazakhstan and Arkhangel's districts. Many of these people were lost without trace. Approximately 336 000 Polish refugees who were running from the German army were also deported to the USSR in June 1940.

Civilian Deportations

In addition, between 1200 000 and 1500 000 permanent inhabitants of eastern Poland were taken to the USSR in the process of four deportations. Members of the 'General Langfitt Group' were represented in all of these deportations. Halina Juszczuk, who was a child of eight, was in the first block of transports.

On the 17th of September 1939, the Russians crossed the border. As my family were living only sixty kilometres from the border they were at our place at six o'clock in the evening. My father said goodbye to us that day and he went to the little town Niechniewiczze. He never came back because they arrested him and all the other ex-servicemen from our district, including our Uncle Ludwig Majcher, my mother's brother. They were in prison in Nowogródek for three months and then they were deported to Russia. We don't know where and we never heard from them.

We went back home and it was a dreadful time. We had soldiers coming into the house,

putting my mother against the wall, wanting to shoot her. We children cried. We didn't know what was happening. Then my mother had a nervous breakdown because she couldn't go on alone. I remember her sitting on the bed staring blankly at the wall. We didn't know what to do. She didn't cook for us. But there was very little to cook because the Russian soldiers took most things. A few days after the Russians came my grandmother came to stay with us. She provided great support to us because my mother was in a state of despair and unable to perform her normal tasks.

Then at two o'clock in the morning on 10 February 1940 they came knocking on the door with guns. There were two NKVD people with guns and some local sympathisers. They told us to pack up and be ready in two hours. We were four children. My sister Krystyna was only eleven, I was eight and a half, my brother was four and my sister was two. We all cried. We didn't know what was happening. It was very cold.

The locals that came into our house that night took pity on us and wrapped some of our possessions into bed covers for us to take on the sledge. They told us that we were going to be transferred to another district but we knew that wasn't true. We travelled for a few hours to the nearest town of Baranowicze and waited there about three days for the whole transport to be gathered together. Then the train started to travel towards Russia. This was the very first transport from our district.

Elizabeth Patro's (nèe Nahajska) family were also sent into exile in the first round of transportations. Although Elizabeth was only an innocent child of 5, she has very distinct flashes of memory about the night of 10 February 1940 because it was the night which started an 'endless limbo of lost souls'.

It was an intensely cold winter night, through a slightly ajar door, floated a soft stream of candle light, voices of my father and Uncle Janek and the quiet sobbing of my mother. Iza, my elder sister, tossed restlessly in her bed, and further, near the large window, Tolek, my younger brother, was fast asleep.

I was fully awake. Laying scared and motionless I listened to the continuous howling of the dogs, wailing of women and screams of children. At first very faint and far, far away, then closer and closer, until the tumult was upon all of us. Screaming we jumped out of our beds and ran toward the kitchen.

There was a very loud banging on the entrance door, then a gruff voice in Russian: 'Otwieraj!' (Open). A gust of freezing wintry air filled the room at the entry of three burly 'Saldats'. One of them jumped toward my father, pushed him against the wall and thrust his bayonet under his chin. 'Stoi!' (stand still) he shouted.

The second soldier was ordering my sobbing mother to pack: 'You have fifteen minutes so hurry'. The third guarded the door. Suddenly our St Bernard, Sultan, appeared. With his huge bulk, bristled-up coat and ferocious look he was growling menacingly at the soldier. Very, very slowly the saldat lifted his gun, aimed and fired. 'Sultan, Sultan!' we screamed, the dog managed one step back, gave one long yelp then fell heavily into the soft white snow.

Mother slowly went to the bedroom, took a large quilt and threw it over the carcass of our

beloved dog. She did not cry. We children just stood and watched as the white quilt and white winter snow became slowly stained by bright red blood.

Kazimierz Sosnowski was 11 years old, but still remembers the episodes leading to deportation clearly:

In January 1940 the NKVD arrested my father three times for interrogation. The first time they released him after a few hours. The second time he was with them half a day, and the third time they kept him for a day and a half. When he came home he said he was not going back to them because they were trying to make him an informer. He took some clothes and escaped from Polesie to Warsaw on 15 January 1940.

On 10 February the NKVD came at around midnight with rifles to wake us up. They put all four of us against the wall and started searching the house for documents, arms, ammunition, anything. I remember looking down the barrel of the rifle wondering when the bullet would come out. When they finished searching, the house was in a shambles. Everything was upside down and all over the floor. They told us to dress and took us to a certain place for interrogation. There was no interrogation. They took us to a place where they were grouping people before taking them to the train. Everybody else had clothes and food. We didn't have any.

On the way to the station we had to pass our house and the Russian soldiers allowed Mother to go inside and pick up whatever she could. When she got inside, she found that one of the local Byelorussians had put all our hams and bacon on the bed. My mother said, 'These belong to me', but they were too heavy for her to carry. He said, 'Your reign here is over now. These belong to me'. They started arguing but a Russian soldier intervened and told the local to carry those things to the sleigh. Mother packed whatever she could in some bedding but we had no time to prepare ourselves for the harsh winter. We were very unfortunate. We struck bad people.

The second wave of transports, totalling around 160 trains, departed in April 1940 and consisted of an estimated 320 000 people, mostly the families of men who had been arrested because they were members of the *intelligentsia* or had once been in the Polish military. The Trella family were among this group:

Not long after the Russians arrived in our city the people had to vote to either approve the annexation of eastern Poland - they called it western Ukraine - or for approval of the communist regime. I am not sure which it was. Nobody really had any choice because they would be arrested straight away if they voted incorrectly.

On 10 February 1940, when the first wave of deportation was taking place, we heard that sugar would be available at a particular place so we went there in the middle of the cold winter night to queue. While we were waiting a cart came down the road and one of the women in it yelled, 'Why are you bothering? We are being taken to Russia and you will all be taken too'. That was our first inkling of things to come but we as a family never expected that we would be deported. Still, because of the rumours every night, I would wake up if a lorry went by and listen to see if it was stopping in front of our house.

Then, on 13 April, in the middle of the night I was dreaming that we were being deported

and in the dream I heard the knocking on our door. In that instant I woke up and the knocking was real. There were about six people. The man in charge came into the bedroom and read the official communique which said that we were an undesirable element in eastern Poland and we were being transported to the Soviet Union. They never told us what part of Russia they were going to take us to. One of the ordinary soldiers came into the bedroom and stressed that we should take the warm things so my mother had a large wooden chest and she packed practically all our clothes. They gave us only an hour to get ready but as the lorry that was taking us took longer we had time to pack all our clothes and some food. The whole household was going, including my grandparents. My Aunt wasn't there, which was fortunate. She was able to send us food parcels in the first few months of our exile. (Urszula Paszkowska n e Trella)

Wieslawa Paszkiewicz (n e Wojtasiewicz) was twelve and a half years old when her father was arrested on 22 February 1940. He was a public servant and they never heard what happened to him. Three weeks later, Wieslawa and her mother Apolonia were deported from Lw w.

On 13 April 1940 many thousands of mothers and children whose fathers had been arrested were taken. We only had half an hour to pack. The soldier who came told us that we would die in Russia but my mother put everything she could in sheets and blankets, packed like a swag. In one night six long trains went on to Russia from Lw w and in every single cattle truck there were fifty or sixty people. I don't know how many thousands went in just one night.

The third block of deportations took place over June and July of 1940 and consisted of some 240 000 people, including families of men who had been arrested and refugees from central and western Poland. For example, Tadeusz Dobrostanski's father, Jozef, was editor-in-chief of a daily newspaper, *Kurier Bałtycki* in Gdynia on the Baltic Sea. Jozef was arrested in June 1940 and subsequently deported to Rybinsk near Vologda. Tadeusz Dobrostanski explained how his father attempted to enhance the safety of his young family against the advancing German army.

My father was a journalist, so he was very aware of the situation. Three days before the war started he sent my mother, brother and myself to our relations in Lw w, in south-eastern Poland. He thought we would be safer there because we were escaping the German blitzkrieg which started close to where we were living. My father joined the army and after the 1939 campaign was over, he survived and joined us in Lw w. When the Russians entered Poland on 17 September they started introducing Russian laws and regulations. The NKVD were very powerful: they knew everything and many people disappeared all of a sudden. One night at about one o'clock they knocked on our door and arrested my father because he was an officer in the Polish army. They gave him a short time and assured my crying mother it was only a short interrogation and that he would be sent home. Of course he wasn't and three or four days later, on a Sunday afternoon, as we returned from church, they came to arrest the three of us.

They gave us very little time to pick up our belongings. We were put on a lorry where there were other unfortunates already waiting. While we were driving to the station strange people, realising that we were deportees, were tossing whatever food they could on that lorry. We all shared that later on, on the train. We were taken to the railway station where they put us into cattle carriages, roughly sixty people in each. It was 26

June 1940 when we started the journey. We knew they were taking us east but that was all.

Finally in May and June 1941, just a short time before Germany attacked the USSR, the NKVD managed to round up another 200 000 families of men arrested after April 1940, as well as many city *intelligentsia*, railway workers and foresters. While these families had so far been 'saved' from the hardships of life in the outer reaches of the Soviet Union, Wladyslawa Smenda's brief account of life in Soviet occupied Poland speaks for itself:

When the war started in 1939 I was left to teach but my husband was arrested by the Russians. He was in Stanislawow in prison and during these months I could visit him and give him small parcels and money so he could buy something in the prison. He was tried as an officer in a closed court because he fought in the 1921 war between Poland and Russia and was given the death sentence. The war was about the eastern border. I hired a lawyer who appealed and his sentence was changed to life with hard labour. This was in 1940. I don't know what happened to him but the last money I sent came back. That is all I know. I tried to find out if he was one of the men at Katyn.

A few months later, on 22 May 1941, the NKVD came at night and told us we were to be resettled. They took me and the children to Russia. My son, Janusz, was nearly ten, and Teresa was six. When we were in the cattle wagons, in the train being taken to Krasnoyarsk in Russia, the war between the Germans and Russia started. They broke the alliance between them. The train was needed for the soldiers, so we were unloaded and put in a field surrounded by soldiers. We were women and children. Lots of children. No men. Then we were taken to the station on lorries. It was awful.

Teresa Sosnowska (nèe Zebrowska) was the eldest daughter in a farming family in the Lomza district, east of the Vistula River, at the western point of the Russian invasion.

In 1939 when the war broke out our father was mobilised and was taken with the Polish army to Kozel'sk by the Russians. That was the camp where the officers, judges, and *intelligentsia*, were killed in Katyn. Only a very few were left. Father escaped by saying that he was not an officer, just a railway worker, so they let him out. A week after he returned home a neighbour told him that he was on the NKVD list so he went away. After that we never had a night's sleep because they were always coming around our buildings, interrogating my mother. Even my little three-year-old brother was questioned. My mother used to take us to her mother's place, quite a long way away, to visit father who was in that area. Only my elder brother and myself were allowed to see him, not my younger siblings, just in case they told the wrong people without understanding. We didn't see my father again after late 1940 or early 1941.

We expected to be deported one day because of our father and because there were a lot of people being deported from our area. We knew what to expect because my cousin's aunt was arrested and we had word from them. We were arrested in June 1941. We children were sleeping in the barn because it was a hot night. My elder brother escaped through a window. We had to go inside where they counted us. One of the Russians who came to arrest us had been billeted with us a few months before and thanks to him we were able to pack many more things than most people. He went through every little nook and told us

what to take. We had ham and sausages and shpec⁴ because my uncle had slaughtered a pig not long before. They kept telling us not to worry, that we were going to join father. That made my mother very worried because she thought that he must have been arrested.

In the morning, they took us to the station where we were surrounded by Russian soldiers. They kept us there while they tried to find my brother and, because of that, my grandmother had time to bake us some bread and bring that to us, with a sack of potatoes. So we had a chance to say goodbye to my grandmother but they didn't find my brother. That evening, on 20th of June 1941, we were taken away. It was just two days before the war started between Germany and the Soviet Union.

These were among the last transports to leave Poland for the Soviet Union, where they joined many of their Polish compatriots as forced labourers in mines and lumber camps near the Arctic Circle, or to be dumped on the steppes of Kazakhstan. Over forty years later Ryszard Pawlowski reflected on the bemusement these events caused him as a child:

We were taken because my father worked for the government and because of his position in the army. He had also fought in the previous war against the Russians. I was only six or seven years old and my brother was younger. I don't see what harm we could have done to them and why they had to deport us but that was their policy. Who knows why it happened. It is really hard to understand why they were deporting children and women. I suppose we were just victims of war.

[Chapter 3](#)