The General Langfitt Story

Chapter 3 - Exile in the USSR

The treatment of the Poles by the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1941 is still an unfamiliar story to many people. At the time, news of what was going on barely reached the west, and later in the war, when Britain and the United States became allies of the USSR, discussion of the episode was discouraged as tactless. Ascherson (1987, p.94) has observed that the true story only emerged in fragments in the post-war years, and has been 'overshadowed by the more spectacular and better-publicised savageries of the Nazi occupation of Poland and the rest of Europe'. Yet, it was no less brutal or cold blooded. As Anne Applebaum (1994, p.14) observed in an article in the *Age*:

> Almost no one in the west considers (Stalin's) crimes to have been evil in the same visceral way that they feel Hitler's crimes to have been evil. Until recently, many argued that there was no way to commemorate Stalin's victims, because there was no proof of their identity or their numbers. This was always a somewhat disingenuous argument - witnesses and written memoirs abound.

Even if there is still a lack of interest in Stalin's victims there is much to be learned from those who survived their unwilling encouners with the regime, both for the knowledge of oppressive regimes which their stories offer and for an understanding of the sheer magnitude of human endurance in the face of war.

In particular, the strength of the women stands out. Faced with the forced removal of husbands, fathers and brothers, often without the opportunity to offer a farewell and fearing the worst for their future, they showed great courage. The loneliness, the seemingly impossible task of feeding and protecting their children, the desperation in losing contact with husbands and families, and the physical endurance needed to carry out work for which they were ill equipped are all things most of us can barely imagine. The children too were forced to take on tasks and responsibilities far beyond their years. That so many survived the brutal journeys which were ahead of them is a true testament of their faith and strength.

The Journeys to the USSR

The cattle trucks into which the Polish deportees were loaded were headed for different destinations thousands of kilometres away in the depths of the Soviet Union. The distances covered in the course of these transportations can be hard to visualise, even when they are plotted on a map of the former Soviet Union. All of the transportations took their human cargo to various *kolhoz*, or collective farms, west of the Ural Mountains into the forest, north into the Arkhangel'sk district, into the tundra and marshlands of Siberia and south west to Kazakhstan and Kirghistan on the steppes of Central Asia. Lucjan Królikowski, a young Polish seminarian who was transported to Arkhangel'sk, maintains that by deporting and dispersing the Poles over these vast territories, the intention of the Soviet government was 'to accelerate their assimilation into the local element and thereby make it impossible for them to organise' (Królikowski, 1983, pp. 16-17).

None of the deportees were informed of their destination beforehand or told how long they might expect to be cooped up on the journey. Bogdan Harbuz remembered how his family were driven to the station:

> We could see thousands and thousands of other people in the same predicament. We were all loaded on to cattle trucks, which were then closed before the transport started off for Russia. At the same time hundreds of other transports from the different parts of Poland under Russian domination started towards the same destination - Siberia. Some people got there in a week or two weeks but our transport went at a very slow pace: the trip took approximately five to six weeks. In all that time we were given no food and very little water and, because of that, quite a few people died. At the sidings we saw heaps of bodies from the previous transports lying piled up under the snow.

Królikowski (1983, p. 17) summarised the situation, 'Hunger, disease, dirt and exhaustion decimated the exiles along the way. Most of the victims were among the weakest, the elderly, but little children also died en masse . . .' during these lengthy journeys. Several people described how deportees in the cattle trucks tried to bolster up their spirits as they left their beloved homeland. For example, Jerzy Mazak recounted the chaos at the station as crowds milled around outside:

> there were people coming and going, noise and crying as families were separated. Then, a significant thing happened when the doors were shut. People started praying and singing hymns. That went on for the whole trip. We stopped for other wagons to join. It took seventeen days to reach Kazakhstan. During the trip people were sick and it was cold. When we made stops there was boiling water to make some tea and people were delegated to go out for provisions, bread and soup. We had very little food. At times we would pull up alongside another train which held prisoners of war and people would call out to find out who was on the train. People were looking for their loved ones. They were dramatic scenes. Being a child, I wouldn't have had the full understanding.

In a similar vein, Urszula Paszkowska recalled that when their train stopped in Lwów, they were greeted by an 'amazing sight'. The station was:

> covered with a multitude of people, mainly youngsters, who had heard about the deportation. Many of the young Polish boys sneered at the convoys of Russian soldiers. The soldiers looked helpless because even if they had started shooting, they couldn't have shot the thousands of people who were there. We were given our first meal there, a bucket of hot soup, and then we proceeded eastwards. As our train started rolling, the whole carriage started singing religious songs. When we reached the border, the difference between the two areas was massive. In Poland the fields were small. The countryside looked like a chess board. When we crossed the border it was just vast areas of dark soil. In some parts there were beetroots or other crops still not collected from the previous year. The Polish countryside looked somehow cheerful where the Russian one was very depressing.

Memories of the train journey to the Soviet Union remain strongly etched in the minds of most people, unless they were very young or became sick on the journey east. Elizabeth Patro, reflecting upon a young child's memory of the journey east, has 'vague recollections of dark

overcrowded wagons, pangs of hunger, the thirst and the stench, long endless journeys, pine forests, freezing cold, snow, snow, snow, then the strange country of Russia, its language, its people'. In a similar vein, Zenon Zebrowksi, who was barely 4 years old at the time his family were deported in 1941, describes his memories of these years as 'underexposed snapshots, dark, with not too much detail. There is no continuity. For instance, going to Russia I remember seeing the forests from the train, going through mountains and tunnels. There was no sign of habitation'.

The conditions of travel were uniformly abysmal, made worse by the length of time people were shut in the trains as they traversed huge distances across the Soviet Union. The time people spent locked in the confined, unhygienic trains varied according to their destination. In all reported cases, each cattle truck was loaded with fifty to sixty people, indiscriminately packed together in trucks lined with planks on which they sat and slept throughout the journey. In some transports there were complete families but for the most part the transports consisted predominantly of women and children. Generally, there were only small ventilation slots to serve as windows, and the carriages were frequently scaled until the train passed the border into the Soviet Union. Some cattle trucks contained a small stove, although fuel was scarce. A hole in the floor served as a latrine. When they were available, blankets or sheets were placed around the hole in an effort to maintain a degree of privacy, but this was not always possible.

> It took us two weeks to reach our destination, Arkhangel'sk. I remember when they first opened the cattle truck and the guards said we could relieve ourselves, men women and children all together, squatting by the train. There was no shelter so it was very embarrassing but towards the end of the journey no one was paying any attention any more. It had to be accepted as it was. (Kazimierz Sosnowski)

The supply of food varied from transport to transport. Where the deportees were fortunate enough to be given food by the Russian authorities, it generally consisted of buckets of watery soup or the occasional cabbage pie. In many instances, no food or water was supplied and the deportees had to rely on whatever they had been able to pack in the brief hours before being taken from their homes.

> They opened the doors perhaps twice, to give us a couple of buckets of drinking water and what they called a fish soup which was in fact boiled water with sliced onions and herring heads floating in it. We were really dependent on the food which we managed to take for that journey. That was it. (Tadeusz Dobrostanski)

Irena Makowiecka, who was deported in April 1940 with her mother and three siblings, recounts:

> There were only women and children, very few men, because we were in a transport of families of the men who had already been arrested. We stopped at stations and were given hot water. Somebody had some beautiful, huge white onions and they tasted wonderful. This was luxury. I didn't realise how tasty onions can be until we went on the train! I don't remember that much from the travelling. You switch off and wait when you are frightened and when bad things happen to you; you just try to survive the best you can.

The final wave of transports left Poland just before war was declared between Germany and Russia in June 1941. Wladyslawa Smenda, who was deported with her 10-year-old son Janusz

and 6-year-old daughter Teresa in May 1941, described how they were shut in the cattle wagons for nearly three weeks:

> We slept on the bare boards. We were lucky because we had been allowed to pack a few things, so we had coats to lie on. Some people had nothing. There were only tiny windows and once a day they opened the doors and gave us soup and water. I never ate any. I was so numb that the people in the train were afraid I was going mad. They always put me by the window so I could look out. I didn't look out for my children but the other people gave them something to eat. Then, when we were north of Krasnoyarsk, by the Yenisei River, the war between the Germans and Russians started and the train was needed for the army. We were unloaded and put in a field surrounded by soldiers. We were women and children. No men. It was awful but I was better when they put me out from the train. I started to think then.

Also in the last wave of transports from Poland were the Zebrowski family.

> We were taken away on the evening of 20th June 1941 and the war broke out on the 22nd. When we were in Minsk, on the Russian side of the border, the last two trucks on our train were bombed so we were very quickly whisked away from there. We didn't stop for a long time. It was very hot. There was a lack of water but my mother had baskets of eggs and we drank those raw eggs to help our thirst. I don't know how long we had been travelling for, but our bread was already mouldy. One night, we stopped at a station and Mother took one loaf of this mouldy bread and threw it from our truck. There was a woman in a beautiful coat and she grabbed it. You should have seen her face. It was covered with that mould but she was eating with such a hunger. My mother cried and said, 'Is that what my children are going to?' She didn't throw any more bread away. (Teresa Sosnowska nèe Zebrowska)

Life in the USSR

The Polish exiles' experiences in the Soviet Union are difficult to encapsulate. All participants in this project had strong recollections of this time in their lives, and each account ranged across a diversity of themes, all pertinent to an understanding of survival. Together, their stories highlight the complex nature of human endurance in the face of extreme physical and psychological hardship.

Polish deportees were sent to a range of geographical locations for varying lengths of time, dependent upon the date of their arrest and deportation. Once in the Soviet Union, their immediate fate was largely determined by the people who controlled the local *kolhozes*.

Some adults, labelled as *wrieditieli* or 'undesirables', were left to their own devices, with no opportunity to work for food provisions. Others were forced into a variety of labouring jobs such as tree felling and wood cutting, digging holes, snow clearing, brick making, milking, shovelling grain, and cooking. Access to both accommodation and food varied from *kolhoz* to *kolhoz*, as did relations with the Soviet authorities and local inhabitants. Some families were able to establish limited contact with relatives back in Poland and were assisted by periodic parcels of food or money, others had to rely solely on the possessions they had been able to take with them. As many deportees had been given little time to pack, their ability to supplement meagre rations

through the sale or exchange of personal possessions varied greatly.

Polish children deported to USSR after 1941

(Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)

In some communities children were forced to attend Soviet schools, while in others they were left to their own devices. Occasionally children found paid work to help the survival of their diminished family units, in other families the eldest children aided family survival by undertaking the care of younger siblings, and by 'hunting and foraging' for additional sources of food and fuel.

All Polish exiles had to endure an attack upon their religious and political ideologies. As Roman Catholics forced to live under a communist regime they were subject to various degrees of religious persecution, as well as an enforced acceptance of a communal work ethic which allowed no room for the strong sense of individuality so cherished by Poles.

Perhaps the most effective way to illustrate both the diversity and the common experiences of deportation is to allow participants to speak for themselves. These edited excerpts give some indication of the conditions which had to be survived and the ways in which individuals managed in the face of adversity. For ease, they have been sorted into three sections, the first covering experiences of exile in Siberia, the second detailing experiences in Kazakhstan and the third covering other experiences of deportation. The stories are presented in order of age of the participant at the start of exile.

Siberia

Stanislawa Jutrzenka-Trzebiatowska (then Adamska) was 33 years old when she and her daughter were deported to Kotlas, north-east of Moscow.

> When the train stopped there were people with horses and sleighs who loaded our things and took us to this clearing in a big forest, a little distance from the train stop, where there were big buildings. Someone told us that they were built during the first war by Italian prisoners of war. The buildings were empty and there was a terrible smell of insecticide. Night was falling, nobody was there to look after us, nobody was interested in us. There were about eighty to a hundred of us, including some Jewish people, some teachers like me, just women and children and a few old men. Some people had a little food, some

> women gave me some bread. During the eight days in the train we had been given some fish, very salty. We had water from the train, but only if you had something to put it in.
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> We were there for around eighteen months. Gradually we made things a little better. We divided rooms off and built a clay oven. The old men made bread for us, not for sale but to give out. We traded possessions, clothing and shoes for food and milk from the few cows. If you had nothing you could not get milk. I found a goat. In my country only Jewish people drank goat's milk, but in Russia it was good and my daughter became healthy. All this time I was praying to be able to go back to Poland.

Maria Szuster-Nowak was 32 years old when she was deported from the town of Krzemieniec in eastern Poland with her only daughter Mietka and two young cousins. At the age of 86, Maria found it very painful, and at times very confusing, to recount her experience of exile.

> I do not remember all the details to tell you now but sometimes when I go to sleep, I shut my eyes and I see all these things. I remember everything and I think, 'How did God give us the strength?' I always prayed to God but there were some times I would say, 'God. If we have to be all the time here, get us to die tomorrow. I don't want to live like this. It is a hard life'.
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> We travelled for a long time when they took us from Poland, a long way to a new settlement in a place called Ukdom, in the Renski region north of Arkhangel'sk. I had three children with me but I had to go to work so I could buy bread. Every morning I took my husband's trousers and axe and I went to the forest to fell trees. We used to make heaps - they called them -'cubermetres' - a special size stack a metre high and two metres long.
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> You could buy one kilo of bread if you were a working person and 300 grams for the children. We used to eat just a piece of bread and some soup. The Russian women used to come from the settlement and we used to sell anything valuable, like clothes and pillow cases, that we had managed to take with us from Poland in order to buy other food. They were poor people too, the Russian people. That is how it was for nearly two years.

At the age of fourteen, Zdzislawa Wasylkowska (nèe Rewaj), along with both parents and her 10-year-old sister, Aleksandra, were transported to a camp in the very north of Arkhangel'sk named Zaoazierie, which had been built by Ukrainian deportees in 1936.

> We had been told how terrible this place was but being young I didn't pay much attention. When you are young, you think everything will be all right. It was almost night time when we arrived and we were given a small room in the barracks for five or six families. It was a charming, very beautiful country in a way, with snow and trees all around us. My father had to go to work until he was arrested again, along with some other men, towards the end of the year. They never told you why people were arrested, they just said you were the enemy of the people. He was sent to another camp, cutting trees and then transporting them up to Arkhangel'sk during the summer months. We were hysterical when he left and we were not even allowed to say goodbye.
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> We had a very hard time after Father went because we were persecuted. My mother couldn't get a job at first and there was no money to buy bread. My sister was a little girl

> at the time: she was so skinny and her stomach was distended with hunger.Then, at the most critical moment, a parcel arrived from my uncle, with some money. It was like a miracle. That is what saved us. My mother eventually got work on the sledges. It was night work and very hard but it paid quite good money. We stayed there until the German-Russian war broke out.

Regina Tabaczynska (nèe Tijewski) was 12 years old when she was deported from Rowne in eastern Poland to Poldnievitzsa settlement in the Siberian forest.

> In our barrack, number thirteen, were two big halls, two or three smaller rooms, and one big stove for everybody. In that hall were about a hundred people, families with small children. There were not many men and some women had about four, five or six children until they started dying from typhoid fever and dysentery. We were sleeping next to each other, packed like sardines along big benches around the sides of the rooms. We were on a lower bench. Terrible conditions and terrible bed-bugs. It was lucky for us that we had packed some carpets because we slept under them. Sometimes during the winter when you woke up in the morning everything was stuck to the wall with frost.

> Bread was a luxury and we could very seldom get any meat. It was already a starvation diet but not to the point of death. My mother had succeeded in taking some butter, lard and meat from Poland, so we lived on that but a lot of our things were lost during that journey. They were probably stolen but I don't bear any grudge to those women. They had to save their children. In one family there were six children and they were dying. That woman couldn't do a thing. She was deported without being able to take anything and she had to try and survive. I don't think she did. We stayed there for about two years.

Barbara Kaluzynska (nèe Horbaczewska) was 10 years old in 1940 when she was deported to the village of Bohatyrewka in northern Siberia with her mother and younger brother.

> We arrived on the 1st of May. I remember the date because it was a very big holiday in Russia. There were six families, with small children and I was one of the oldest. My brother was very ill then and we were just put in a village club and left there. It was a Ukrainian village because in 1936 some people of Polish and Ukrainian descent were taken by the Russians and put there, where they built their own village. They understood our plight and took us into their homes. There was not much we could do there because it was such a small collective farm. They were raising cattle and wheat. There was no work for the women and children. We were just there, living and exchanging things. It was not a bad life really because the people were good to us. Then in July my brother died. I was very upset. We were there for many months although I don't remember how long.

Kazimierz Sosnowski was 11 years old when he was deported with his mother and two elder brothers in February 1940.

> We ended up in the district of Arkhangel'sk where it is mostly forest and forestry work cutting timber for building. My-age children had to go to school but there was not enough food and there was no money to buy food. Mother was working, my eldest brothers were working and I was going to school. I was hungry all the time and I left school and found myself some light work. In two years I had about thirty different jobs! I delivered

supplies to people in the camps, cleaned bark from the forest floor, stripped bark from the trees, cut hay for horses, raked hay, made clearings for small farms and government paddocks, delivered manure, worked with a surveyor. Anything that was possible I did and sometimes I was earning more money than Mother. I was always getting better money than my eldest brother although I don't know how it happened.

> My two friends and I were called 'heroes of work'. That is how my life was there until the war broke out between Germany and the Soviet Union and the Soviet Union became allies with England and through that they became allies with the Polish government in exile. Then we got our freedom and had to travel south.

Halina Juszczyk was deported in February 1940, along with her mother, grandmother, aunt, two sisters and younger brother. She was not quite 9 years old when they arrived in Siberia:

> The train took us as far as Vologda, in Siberia. From there we were put on a different train and taken to Vel'sk. From there we were taken on sleighs to a camp on the River Churga. The camp consisted of six barracks and we were allocated a place with some other people, together with my Aunt Helena. My mother had to work in the forest cutting the branches from felled trees. They had to work up to their waist in the snow in winter from six o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night. Once my mother left home, she changed altogether. Her only aim was to save the children. From being a very timid, quite small, nicely spoken person she became very resilient and resourceful. She wasn't used to hard work because we had servants at home but she found the inner strength that was necessary to struggle for the survival of her family.

> We older children had to go to school and the two youngest were supposed to go to the camp kindergarten. My mother's great worry was that the two youngest would be taken away. My oldest sister Krystyna was twelve by then, so she was the one who looked after us and cooked for us and after school she would stand at the door of the kindergarten to make sure that the younger children, Stas and Jadzia, were not taken away. I was the one to gather the wood, to stand in the queue where they gave us soup, but she was the one who had to be responsible for the younger children.

> Life there was awfully hard. We survived by selling some of the things we had brought from Poland. In summer we children would gather berries in the forest and we would sell them for a little money which helped us pay for our bread and soup. Summer in Siberia was very beautiful. After such a winter it was amazing that anything survived under the snow. There were beautiful flowers. One of my jobs was to gather the water from the Churga and bring it to the house. The path was so slippery and during the winter it was all ice. I don't know how I didn't fall into the icy water below. I do know that God looked after us. He didn't want us to die there.

Tadeusz Dobrostanski was just 6 years old when he was deported with his 36-year-old mother and 10-year-old brother to a settlement named Lobva, north of Svierdlovsk, in Siberia. He remembers it as:

a picturesque place in forest near a beautiful river. All the houses were log cabins. We were given half a house to share with a couple of Polish Jews and their son. Digging between the logs of the cabin, we found little rolls, like cigarette papers, saying that this log cabin was built in 1863 by Polish deportees after the 1863 uprising. Their names were recorded. So we were not the first Poles in that area. Very soon they organised work brigades and Mother was given an axe and hand saw. She became a wood chopper in the forest. This was the first physical work in her life because she was a dramatic actress; her life was theatre so this was very hard for her. Somehow, she managed to establish communication with our family in Lwów. We were allowed to send letters, all written in Russian and heavily censored. Through these letters to our family in Lwów she established a correspondence with my father, who had been deported to Rybinsk near Vologda, along with other Polish army officers. My father was trying very hard to get transferred to us, without success. I still have the original letters.

My brother and I were sent to a Russian school. To us it was a great adventure and we were quite happy. We never appreciated the seriousness of the situation. Very soon I was converted to a young communist singing Russian songs and drawing pictures of red stars and shouting 'long live Father Stalin'. They were brainwashing very young and vulnerable brains. My mother was very patriotic, like most of the mothers, and she wasn't too happy, but this was the only option for us because it was the only school and we had to go to school. But she was very particular to make sure that we also learnt Polish and that we would never forget that we were of Polish nationality.

Young Elizabeth Patro was only 5 years old when her family was deported to Siberia. She recounts how, after her father had been sent away to work:

Mother got orders from the authorities to send me to school before fall. She vehemently objected, claiming that I was too young - but no-one listened. I, on the other hand, could not understand why? After all I knew the Russian alphabet. I could count to a hundred and I even learned how to use the abacus. At last the day arrived. Loaded with a cloth school bag with two long handles, a perfectly planed pine board, two soft pencils, and an abacus I marched to school. At that time paper was very scarce, so the pine boards were used for writing. Almost every day after school it had to be re-planed and re-lined ready for the next day.

I did like school and tried very hard. A few weeks later I was called to the front of the class and the teacher informed me that I had become an *atlicznica* - an excellent student - and, with a great reverence, she handed me a small red triangular scarf, which was placed on my shoulders to the clapping of the class. In conclusion the class sang a lively Russian song, which I did not know. Greatly excited I ran home that day. Bursting through the door I suddenly stopped, my mother with tears in her eyes slowly pulled off the red scarf and told me very seriously never, never to bring it home again. 'Why?' I wondered. 'Why?'

Like Tadeusz Dobrostanski, Elizabeth Patro recalls the attempts to indoctrinate the children to Stalinist ways.

On 21 December 1940 when we were awaiting Christmas, the order came from the

school authorities for all children to appear on time at the communal hall. Once there, we were separated. The Russian children were assembled near the fireplace and the Polish children at the opposite corner. The celebration of Stalin's birthday commenced with the hymn of glory of Russia, then one of the teachers came unexpectedly to the group of Polish children and asked, 'Do you believe in Christmas?' After a long pause some of us answered 'Yes'. 'Do you believe that God whom you call Father was born at Christmas?' No-one moved and no-one spoke. 'If you believe that there is a God', he continued, 'pray to Him for lollies'. 'The ones who do not believe in God can go and join the Russian children near the fire, they know there is no God', he continued. Only two slowly crossed the floor, while we watched.

> Kneeling down in the middle of the cold Russian floor, on the cold Russian morning, the small group of cold Polish children prayed as they had never prayed before - and nothing happened. After a long pause the Russian children were asked if they believed in God and they shouted 'No!' They were asked if they believed in *Batko Stalin* (Father Stalin). 'Yes!' they shouted. 'So ask him for lollies', suggested our teacher. 'Batko Stalin, Batko Stalin give us sweets', they chanted and suddenly lollies fell from the ceiling all over the children near the fire. Somehow that memorable day in Russian school opened my eyes and even then, at six, I did know that I was witnessing a lie. God did exist, I was sure of it, and as for lollies, they did not count.

Kazakhstan

Helena Lancucka had been a 36-year-old school teacher in East Poland before she and her 4-year-old son Krzysztof were deported to Kazakhstan in April 1940:

> The journey from Poland took about eleven days. It was a very heavy winter and they put us down in the fields where the snow was very, very deep. It was nearly twelve o'clock at night and there was a horrible, cold wind.

> There were some Polish people who were resettled there before and they already had huts made of mud and grass. Each hut had two rooms where two families lived. There was nothing in the huts, just an earth floor where we put our belongings. In winter time there was no shelter and the snow would come down the chimney. It was hard to get out of that place in winter because the snow was so high. You had to dig your way out and we were mostly women and children so it was hard to cut a tunnel out of the hut. There was no wood for cooking so we had to collect grass to burn. There was hardly any room, especially no room for cooking but there was very little to eat anyway. We had some wheat and we exchanged whatever clothing we had for food but there was very little and there was nowhere to buy that stuff. At first we didn't have to work because we were told that we were brought there to die. But God helped us. It was God's will that we lived.

Wieslawa Paszkiewicz (nèe Wojtasiewicz) was twelve and a half years old when she arrived in Semipalatinsk in Kazakhstan. They were then taken by truck another 140 kilometres to a small Kazak *kolhoz* where they arrived on the first of May holiday. To celebrate the holiday, all the children were given lollies, courtesy of 'Father Stalin'.

> Then they dropped us in a paddock and told us to go and look for some room to sleep.

Kazaks have small huts made of mud and we had to pay for this because we were supposed to be rich people. They didn't take us for work. We just had to live on what we had. We stayed about nine months like this. When winter came, we had nothing to live on. They brought trucks and took us to another village, a Russian village. This was much better because the Russians had better houses.

By spring time we were told if we wanted bread we had to work. They took all the kids from twelve years of age to the steppe to cut the hay. I had never seen anything like that because I came from a big city, and I was an only child so I was not used to working. I had to learn how to drive the ox on the harvester. For our work we got 400 grams of bread and soup. The soup was cooked from oats, like the horses eat. It was very hard on your throat and when you went to the toilet you could see it wasn't good for you. There might be one piece of fatty meat in the soup but that was it. We worked all day and that was what we were fed all this time. Sometimes we might get some buckwheat. All summer was like this.

Nine-year-old Jerzy Mazak, along with his mother, grandmother and aunt, was also taken to a *kolhoz* in Kazakhstan.

They told us that we were to assimilate with the locals and the locals were told to take us into their houses, which were basically mud and peat huts. There were about 300 people at that collective farm. Not one single toilet and only one well to draw water. The climate was hot in summer and -50° C in winter. The only fuel available for cooking and warmth was cow dung and straw so all the women collected the dung and made it into bricks of about 40 x 20 x 20 centimetres. They were made in heavy wooden frames, sun dried and stacked for the winter. Later the children were involved in collecting the dung.

We moved in with a Kazak family and soon after, on the 25th of May, Grandmother died of pneumonia. The coffin was taken by bullock and she was buried at the settlement.

There was Mustafa, his wife Minka and their young 7-year-old son. Their house consisted of an entry, on the left a barn with the sheep, and on the right their room, which had mud floors. In the corner of one room they had a big copper which was used for cooking. There were bugs and lice, and one would see women sitting de-licing each other. People survived by exchanging what they had. The locals did not have much, only a cow or some hens. We were here from May 1940 until April 1941.

Zbigniew Stanislaw Patro was 8 years old when he arrived with his family in Kazakhstan.

We were taken to a *kolhoz*, a collective farm. My grandfather and elder uncle worked on tractors, my younger uncle in the milk processing plant and my mother worked in the fields. My aunt and grandmother did not work. I went to school. All nine of us lived in one room. It was a very primitive existence.

Kazakhstan is very flat and treeless, and as far as one could see there was wheat and cattle pasture. I didn't see a tree all the time I was there. We had big stacks of straw and in winter we used this for fuel. That was the only thing available. There was no wood or coal except for the workshop. To make it warmer in winter we put about half a metre of straw on the floor and when it was crushed it was replaced. The winter was very cold,

> one night I remember it was -60 °C. One morning we woke up and opened the front door and the doorway was completely blocked by snow. The Russians were used to it, they shovelled the snow into big kettles, melting the snow, and then threw the hot water on the snow, making steps up as they went. I remember only the chimneys were sticking out of the snow when we finally went out that day.

Teresa Sosnowska was deported in one of the last transports to leave Poland for the Soviet Union.

> We were sent past the Ural Mountains to Novorsibirsk, not very far from Kazakhstan and were put in a *sofhoz*. A *sofhoz* is like a main *kolhoz*: twelve *kolhoz* answered to one *sofhoz*. We were put in the old school building with about eight families from Pinsk, mainly young women with one or two children. My mother was put to work digging holes. There was no reason to dig these holes. They didn't bother about human beings because they knew that they had many more who would come and do the work so it didn't matter how many died. This was not only with Polish people. They did it to their own people as well.
>
> My aunt had not been deported: she volunteered to come with us because she knew Russia. She had been deported there before when she was younger, and she thought my mother would never be able to manage the children as well as the work. Because she was a volunteer, and because she was too old, she didn't have to work, so she stayed at home to look after us. My mother had to work for all of us.
>
> I was eight when we were deported but when that happened I grew up very quickly. I considered myself a grown-up and I became a little thief! There was another building where they stored sunflower seeds and we used to run up the stairs when no-one was watching, eat as much as we could and steal as much as we could hide. We also learnt how to steal cabbages from the carts. By the end of the season we had forty-nine cabbages stored in our little storeroom, as well as sunflower seeds!

Other experiences of exile

Not all deportees were sent to *kolhoz* in Siberia or Kazakhstan, and others who were did not stay there long. For example, Janina Pienkos (nèe Huszczo) was only 8 years old when she was exiled, along with her sister, younger brother and 35-year-old mother, to the village of Volodarowka in Kazakhstan.

> We were just dumped on the street at night time and that was it. A few families got together and we found a house. Later on people could chose to work on the railways so my mother and a few of her friends went to work there. From that time we lived in railway carriages, very similar to the cattle truck we came from Poland in. The carriages just travelled around Russia. I don't remember where we went. We lived and travelled, and slept on the floor of those carriages near a little fireplace. My sister was very sick. There was a lot of sickness. The adults used to shovel snow from the railway tracks and Mother had a very bad accident. She slipped on the ice, fell and hurt the lower part of her back. I remember there was a lot of blood. Sometimes we stopped in a station and then the train would just go. Whoever had left the carriage was left behind.

> When we arrived in Kirghistan they took some people off that train and sent them to work on collective farms. The rest of us, about ten families, they just left at a China tea house. That is when typhus hit our group and everybody in my family except me was sent to hospital. When my mother got out of hospital and found me, the first thing she did was shave my hair because I was covered in lice. She had to carry my brother on her back because he had malaria on top of that. After that everybody was so weak they couldn't work.

Other groups were sent almost directly to the notorious cotton plantations in Kirghistan. Often referred to as 'the Soviet Louisiana' because of the harsh living and working conditions, these became a common destination for many Polish deportees after the amnesty (see Chapter 4), as they were waiting for an opportunity to leave the Soviet Union. Tadeusz Gruszka was barely 3 years old when his family was deported to Kirghistan early in 1940, so his first formative memories are of:

> cold and hunger. I was with my whole family: my two brothers, myself, mother and father. I was the youngest. We ended up in Kirghistan at first. My family was working in the cotton fields and then my father, I think, was working in the mills. Before the invasion my father was a ranger in the forestry department. In Kirghistan he had to do whatever work they told him to. I was doing nothing: just waiting for my parents to get home, with my brothers. That's how it was. There was nothing to do for us.
>
> The winters were very heavy and we did not have much firewood. I used to go with my brothers at night to get firewood from the cotton fields. This was illegal so we had to be very careful. I must have been about four and a half or five by that time. There was not very much food. My mother and father used to go to the forest to get green plums off the trees. My mother used to cook these into a vegetarian soup made with some things like leaves that the horses used to eat. We could survive but we didn't see meat for about two years. There was a lot of sickness also, due to malnutrition and the conditions of living. My mother and one of my brothers were sick for a while, but they survived. In that part there were maybe two or three other Polish families. I know in one of them, the father died of some disease. It was very bad.

Other families, such as the Smendas, were taken to the very far east of the USSR, near the Mongolian border.

> We were not deported till 22 May 1941, not long before the amnesty. We were one of the last transports with around 700 or 800 people and we were taken to Krasnoyarsk on the River Yenisei, much closer to Manchuria and China than to Europe. From Krasnoyarsk they put us on a barge and we were taken further north and dumped in a place called Sowhobuzin which was a minor administrative centre. It was mainly timber mills. We had been sentenced to 'twenty years duress' - those were the precise words. We were not in jail but we could not move outside the boundaries of that settlement without the approval of the local NKVD and a pass.
>
> Quite surprisingly the major of the NKVD turned out to be a very reasonable human being. There are exceptions everywhere. He helped us and tried to get my mother to work as a school teacher. He insisted that my sister and I go to school rather than work. My

> sister Teresa won Lenin's Prize for being the best student in her year in that primary school. My mother tore it up, which is a pity because it is part of your life. We were lucky compared to many others. We were not in the Soviet Union for very long. (Janusz Smenda)

The first stage of exile drew to an end as the winter of 1941 closed in. As Królikowski (1983, p.17) observed, 'The death harvest among the Poles was terrifying'. No reliable figures exist but it is estimated that anything between a third and a half of the deported Poles were dead by the time of Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 (Ascherson, 1987, p. 93). By the beginning of 1942, almost one-half of the deportees were dead. An estimated 20 per cent of the people sent to the taiga or the steppes died each year while 30 per cent of those who had been sent to prisons or labour camps had died (Królikowski, 1983, p.17). Scattered in small communities throughout Siberia, Kazakhstan, Kirghistan and Uzbekistan, groups of Polish deportees were desperate to leave before they too succumbed to the same fate.

Chapter 4