

The General Langfitt Story

Chapter 4 - Amnesty and the Journey South

The status of Polish deportees in the Soviet Union began to change when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941 in Operation Barbarossa. Ultimately it led to the announcement of an amnesty which released Polish exiles from their labour camps and allowed them to travel south in search of freedom and the Polish army. This was being reformed to help fight the German army which was rapidly advancing into Soviet territory.

The personal recollections of those who survived indicate the relief they felt when news of the amnesty reached them, but also detail the hardship they encountered in their efforts to escape. It was a period characterised by uncertainty, hunger, starvation, disease and daily confrontations with death, both of strangers and loved ones. These experiences have etched themselves into the minds of those who witnessed them and this is most clearly understood when their stories are recounted face to face: the written word sanitises the emotional reality because it cannot capture the pain in many people's voices as they recounted memories which, long ago, have been put behind them.

Each individual's story was an odyssey in its own right for, even within families, experiences varied as family members were frequently separated *en route*. Even where families managed to stay together, both experiences and perceptions of the journey varied according to the age of the story teller, although there were many common themes and a remarkable consistency between stories. There was a marked reluctance to dwell on some of the more disturbing events of the journey and many participants requested that the tape be turned off while they recounted events they thought no-one would believe. Many cried in the course of recollections they had told few, if any, people.

Over fifty years later, the joy of being told of the amnesty remains clear in the memories of all the Polish exiles. Halina Juszczyk described it as 'a miracle for us. Suddenly we found that we were free, but where could we go from Siberia?' Zdzisława Wasylkowska explained how the people in her camp were gathered together and told that 'a terrible thing had happened. But we were really happy that there was a war because we thought that now something might happen for us'. While the German-Soviet war may have raised the hopes of Polish deportees who had relatives able to join the Polish army, for others it meant an immediate escalation in hardship. Women who had already endured so much in trying to care for their children, often without menfolk, found themselves having to call even more on reserves of strength, reserves which had already been stretched to the limits. This part of their journey often subjected them to more physical endurance, more sickness and more death.

Many Polish women were taken for compulsory work building railways. As Helena Lancucka said, without elaboration, 'It was very heavy work, moving sand for the tracks'. For other families, scattered in isolated *kolhozes* where little work had been available to them, war simply meant that the intermittent food parcels which had arrived from relatives in Poland could no longer get through to them. Urszula Paszkowska recalled how conditions deteriorated for them in Kazakhstan for this reason. Although her family was given a small garden plot in which they

planted potatoes, her grandfather did not survive until the summer of 1942, when the family were finally rescued from the *kolhoz* by a relative.

Hopes that war would lead to a change for Polish deportees proved to be well founded. Under pressure from Britain, diplomatic relations between the London-based Polish government in exile and Stalin were resumed within a month of Operation Barbarossa. This was to be no easy coalition. The Polish government in exile found itself in alliance with a neighbour who still claimed an enormous part of their territory and who had, less than two years before, launched an undeclared war on their nation. The British and the Americans requested that Poland and the Soviet Union put the allied war effort first and deal with the issue of the frontier at a later date.

On 30 July 1941, a Polish-Soviet treaty was signed in London arranging for the formation of a Polish army on Soviet soil and declaring an 'amnesty' to all Polish citizens living in camps and prisons in the Soviet Union. As Królikowski (1983, p. 26) observed, 'A strange amnesty indeed when there had been no crime! We suspected that this word was meant to be Moscow's way of deluding the West, to camouflage the outrage that had been committed'.

The estimated quarter of a million Polish troops who had been 'interned' in the Soviet Union had been largely forgotten by the West. After their first dramatic appearance on centre stage at the beginning of the war they had fallen into a no-man's-land because, technically, they were not prisoners of war as the Soviet Union had never declared war on Poland. By the time of the Soviet-Polish agreement in July 1941, Stalin needed all the help he could get, and from August 1941 Polish officers were allowed to scour the USSR collecting their countrymen for the army. In the process, they contacted many of the Polish families who had been 'resettled' throughout the USSR.

Królikowski (1983, p. 30) describes how news of the amnesty reached many Poles indirectly, often by accident, and maintains that many impediments were placed in the way of those seeking identification papers which would give them the freedom to travel south. Thus, 'slowly and reluctantly, the gates of the Siberian and Asian camps swung open, and hundreds and thousands of Poles - soldiers, women, officials, priests and even orphaned children - began to make their way towards centres where the new Polish army was being gathered. Many had already died; many were not released' (Ascherson, 1987, p. 119).

Moving South

For those who had survived deportation and exile to this time, the next task was how to escape the encroaching winter and make the dangerous journey south. Their destinations were defined primarily by an 'instinct for self-preservation' which impelled them to leave the cold of the north and head south to the warmer regions of Central Asia where, rumour had it, the Polish army was gathering (Królikowski, 1983, p. 40). Teresa Sosnowska made the point that deportees were given permission to travel in the Soviet Union only if they could prove that they had a relative in the Polish army:

not everybody could be freed because not everybody had the means. We were only able to go because our cousins, three young people between eighteen and twenty-three, were strong and healthy and had some money. They paid our fare down south and we travelled together, south to Uzbekistan. Although the amnesty was in August, we were in that

sofhas till October or November 1941. It was snowing when we left.

It is not easy to give a summary account of this great exodus. Królikowski (1983, pp. 41-2) describes how Poles, merging to form a 'great human stream', came from areas as far apart as Arkhangel'sk and Vladivostok. The first flood of Polish refugees moved 'like a swollen river blindly rushing ahead' (Królikowski 1983, p. 42) with no information about where they might settle or what they might expect. Many who came from the east moved along the edge of the Mongolian uplands, travelling towards Alma-Ata in south-east Kazakhstan. A few lucky groups managed to reach the Polish embassy in Kuybyshev by travelling along the Volga River. Most found their movements controlled by the NKVD which directed many train transports of Polish civilians towards the poorest regions of Turkestan, near the Aral Sea. Thousands of other Poles made it further south to the republics of Uzbekistan and Kirghistan. The whole region was plagued by endemic infectious diseases such as typhoid, dysentery and malaria.

The scale and horror of these journeys is clear from every account. Królikowski (1983, p. 30) summarised it ironically but effectively by noting that 'freedom often seemed harder than imprisonment'. The situation was further confused by the concurrent relocation of thousands of Soviet citizens from the war zones of the west to the southern republics.

As several participants noted, you had to see the conditions of travel to believe them. Irena Makowiecka, whose 16-year-old brother had died in Siberia, observed that people could only travel with the greatest difficulty: 'It was a nightmare, much worse than getting to Russia. Out of the thirty or forty Polish families who had been taken to our camp in Siberia, only eight families left. There were eight women with about sixteen children in our group and we did it by ourselves, and had to pay for our trip too.'

Some of the older participants in this project preferred to give only a brief account of how they left the Soviet Union. This may have been influenced by difficulties discussing these events in English. For example, Helena Lancucka, now in her nineties, recalled the episode in these words:

While we were working on the train line the Germans were getting close to Moscow. Stalin was afraid and he sent for our General Anders, who had been in a Russian prison, to tell him that he would free the Poles if he organised a Polish army to fight with the Russians opposite Germany. Anders said he would organise it, but only if the Polish army fought under British command. Stalin had to let us go from Russia. After that many Polish prisoners travelled around Russia looking for their families and that is how we heard about the Polish army. So we went to Dzhahal-Abad, in the Kirghiz Republic, where our army was. I was asked to organise a school for the Polish children and that was how I managed to leave Russia with my son.

Similarly, Maria Szuster-Nowak, now in her late eighties, conducted her interviews in a mixture of English and Polish which her daughter translated on the spot. Maria remembered her feelings about the amnesty and journey south clearly:

They told us we were free and could go where we liked but they didn't give us any means of transport. Some men made a raft so we could travel by river to the nearest train station. We all said, 'Never mind if we go down. We'll be finished but we must try to get away from this place'. And so we left on a raft. We lived off bread we had dried and put in bags

for the journey. We would boil some water and dunk the dried bread in the water to soften it. That is how we fed ourselves and the children until we got to a place in the south where the Russian people were growing cotton. We worked there for a while until we got news that the Polish army was forming. Then we went by train to the place where the Polish army had a special post for all these people. I was very sick by then but they put me on the floor in the hospital tent because there were no more beds. The government fed the children when I was in hospital. After I recovered we were taken down south to Tehràn.

Stanislawa Jutrzenka-Trzebiatowska (Adamska) went into rather more detail:

We had no choice of where to go, we just went where they took us. All of us women were taken to a place near a railway. There I suddenly saw a soldier in a Polish uniform, with a Polish emblem. We knew little of what was happening as we had been so isolated so I ran to ask him information; it almost seemed to me that it was my husband. I asked, 'Do you know other officers, someone named Adamski?' He told me that the soldiers who were taken to Rustov had disappeared. I sought out my friend Tokarzewska, she was the daughter of General Tokarzewski's brother, who came from Poland. He told us where to stay so I went with her and her daughter. The road was so muddy and thick. We stayed in this place for a few weeks and from there we were sent to the Aral Sea, near the Syr-Darya River, which means the river of life. Here we were put on a barge to Nukus, south of the Aral Sea.

The journey took three weeks and it was very cold. To go to the toilet people had to stand on the edge of the barge. There was plenty of ice and many children slipped off into the river and were lost. From Nukus it was 100 kilometres to Uzbekistan. Many people were taken there by camels but my daughter and I went by bullock cart with another woman and her daughter. Here we worked the land which was very fertile. We grew *djugara*, a grain you had to grind. One day this other woman came shouting, 'They have come to take us home!' Her husband had found her. I was crying, frightened and praying because without his help I would have had to stay there. He said, 'You will come too as my wife's sister. At the moment they are not looking at documents'. He was not an officer but he had a position with some soldiers under him. I paid him by giving him my husband's boots. This is how I left Russia.

People who were younger at the time tended to give clear accounts about the mechanics of leaving their isolated settlements. For example, Boguslaw Trella, recalled how his family managed to leave:

My grand-aunt's son, who was in the army, came looking for us. He managed to get us out via Sharhreyzabz where his army unit was gathering. From the north to the south we travelled with my grandmother, my mother, my sister and myself and three other ladies that 'Uncle' managed to call cousins. The Polish government's relations with the USSR were deteriorating by this time so it had become very difficult to get the papers to get out. Uncle was a 'clever' fellow and he paid a lot of bribes to officials to get us out. At one station he bribed a woman supervisor of a carriage in a train carrying wounded Russian soldiers with an ounce of tobacco. She put us in the carriage and held back some of the soldiers.

Due to the remote locations in which many deportees had seen out the first years of the war, most had no immediate access to rail. Those brave enough, or desperate enough, set out by sledge, river craft or on foot, and there were many variations on the theme of the resourcefulness which the prospect of freedom fostered among the Polish exiles.

There was nothing organised when the amnesty came. People had to get to the Polish army as best they could, using their initiative. The mothers deserve all the credit for managing to get us out. It was very cold and we travelled by horse-drawn sleigh to the nearest station. When we got there everyone was pushing and shoving to get onto the train. Even to this day I am amazed when I think of the hardships Mother had to overcome to get my brother and myself to the southern regions where the army units were located. We owe our lives to her. (Ryszard Pawlowski)

Halina Juszczyk described her mother's situation when news of the June amnesty reached their settlement. The commandant of their camp informed them that they were free people who could now go where they liked and, six weeks before Christmas 1941, a transport was organised to take Polish women and children to the nearest station. The women had to work until the day before the transport left if they were to be allowed their ration of bread.

On the very last day Mother and Aunty went to work in the forest and about one o'clock we saw a sledge coming back from the forest with my aunty. She had broken a leg in two places. Just imagine the anguish of my mother! There she was, by herself with a family of four children and now Aunty, who had helped us survive, had a broken leg. What to do? Mother wanted very much to go with people she knew could help us on the journey but she decided we would wait until Aunty was better. Six weeks later-on Christmas Day 1941 - we left Churga settlement because the Commandant said it was our last chance to leave. Aunty's plaster was taken off but her leg was in a wood splint and she couldn't walk. There were only three sleighs leaving: Aunty was on one with my little brother and sister but my mother, older sister Krystyna and myself had to walk because we were older. I was nine and Krystyna was twelve. We had to walk about 30 kilometres in the snow through the night. Sometimes I would cheat a little and sit on the back of the sleigh but when the driver saw me he hit me. My shoes were in tatters and I had to rub my feet with snow to restore the circulation so I wouldn't lose my toes through frostbite.

Travelling by Train

Once the deportees had made it to a railway line, their troubles were far from over. Trains were redirected without notice, or failed to stop at certain stations and several people recalled a practice of detaching the last few carriages from the train, leaving the passengers isolated and without resources. Every participant had recollections of the uncertainty of train travel in wartime USSR. Boguslaw Trella explained:

If you were unable to obtain a ticket, or a permit for further train travel, you were stuck at the place where you found yourself. Your chances of reaching Polish centres in the south were small, and when Polish-Soviet relations worsened, you could find yourself in the same situation as before the amnesty.

Mietka Gruszka was not quite 5 years old by the time of the amnesty and her first memories

include fears associated with train travel, of people being left behind, and stories about people whose legs were cut off because they fell under trains.

I remember things that were very emotional, or things that made a big impression. I can still hear the sound of those train whistles at night when we were standing at huge stations with miles and miles of tracks, and trains coming and going. I remember looking out of the window seeing the billows of smoke from the train engines and people rushing out of the train at the stations to see who was going to be first to grab hot water or anything that was available to buy. Also- it seems a strange thing - but I remember being put out of the little window with my seat out to go to the toilet. I was so afraid that I would fall out.

Bogdan Harbuz was 8 years old when his family left the *kolhoz* near Pawlodar in Kazakhstan to head south. He describes his memories of this period as 'pictures that come into my mind.' He recalled being 'packed like sardines' in cattle trucks, waiting for trains, sleeping on cold marble floors, catching a train only to be ordered off a few stations further on, and left to their own devices because the army had requisitioned the transport.

I was just a little boy, and on one of those trains an elderly gentleman asked me to sit on his lap. I sat on his lap and fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning that gentleman was dead. They took him by his feet and hands and threw him onto the platform and the train went on. At one of the stations, Mother went to find out where and how and when the next train was going and to try to get us tickets. One of my sisters went to get hot water and the other went to see if she could buy, steal or swap things for food. I was left guarding the bundles of our possessions and a big suitcase on the platform and a man came, pushed me away, grabbed the suitcase and ran. We saw some terrible things as a result of war.

Another common tale was that of being left behind when trains moved on without warning. Halina Juszczuk remembered her experience of this vividly:

It was after my younger brother and sister had died and mother was in great despair. She just sat there and didn't speak for a few days. Stations in Russia had great big boilers where you could get hot water but the trains usually stopped far away from the station. It was very hard to get on and off the train because there was a huge gap. We children jumped off but we couldn't jump back. I jumped out of the train and ran to get some water and I was almost back when the train started. There were steps in between the carriages and I was lucky to jump on one of these steps where I sat for hours, cuddled into the frozen corpse of a dead man so the wind wouldn't blow directly onto me. I was freezing but I wasn't afraid at all. I was afraid of living people but I was not afraid of the corpse. I knew I must sit there until the train stopped and then I must run to our wagon. As soon as the train stopped, I ran to the wagons at the front. Somebody opened the door and dragged me inside. My mother was crying. I had lost the little water bucket and was half-frozen myself, but all I wanted was to get back to the family.

Family Separation

Many families risked being separated in the hope of saving a member left behind. Some families

were fortunate enough to be reunited within a relatively short time. For example, at the age of 14, Regina Tabaczynska was separated from her parents when her mother was left behind at a station while searching for food. Regina's father left her in the care of another Polish family while he went in search of his wife.

For well over a month I was on my own and I was sick. We went to Bukhara in Uzbekistan and were sent to various *kolhozes*. After a few months, quite unexpectedly, my parents came. They were swelling with hunger. I was very sick, but I wasn't in that state. I wasn't starving. It was a miracle that they found me in all that chaos of the war because they couldn't find any trace of our transport until they began travelling with some Russian military men. One of them knew that the transport was sent to Bukhara. He even knew that I was on that train because people there were asking about my parents. So they went to Bukhara and there they met somebody from our transport who told them which camp I was in and with whom I was staying.

The Sosnowski family were separated at different times in this way. Kazimierz Sosnowski was 13 years old when he, his mother and two elder brothers left their labour camp in September 1941 because they were close to the battle lines.

I was left behind the train three times. One time it took me half a day to catch up. The next time, I got off the train to beg for some food and was left behind. I was trying to find where our transport had gone to and I was directed to a certain place. When I got there they wouldn't allow me to leave. They brought another six children from our transport and took us to a Russian orphanage. We made a big fuss. We didn't want to go to the orphanage; we wanted to join the Polish army. After a night-long argument they gave us breakfast and walked us to the station. One of the girl's mothers was waiting at the station and she took us to our train which was about seven kilometres from where we were. Then the third time it took me three days to catch up by catching different trains which were travelling faster. I don't know why our train was so slow. We finished in the Uzbekistan town of Bukhara. It took us three and a half months to reach the destination. It should have taken six weeks at the most, but that was the Soviet Union.

On Christmas Eve 1941, the three Sosnowski boys were sent to work on a *kolhoz* fifteen kilometres from Bukhara, where they could get food only by selling their few remaining possessions. By the middle of January 1942, they escaped to Bukhara, where they survived by begging for food at the town's cafes. After splitting up to look for food, the three Sosnowski boys managed to hitch a ride, illegally, on a train carrying Polish soldiers to Guzar. The eldest brother was old enough to register with the army and so left his two younger brothers at Karsi. In February, the second brother contracted typhoid fever, from which he died. At 13 years of age, Kazimierz Sosnowski was left on his own, like thousands of other Polish children, so he joined the cadets. Once under the care of the Polish army, he was sent to their rudimentary schools, fed and rested until August, when the cadets were railed to Krasnovodsk, marched five kilometres in the searing heat to the port and then shipped overnight to Pahlavi, where he met up briefly with his mother.

When Maria Sosnowska was separated from her sons, she was left with nothing but the canvas shoes and jacket she was wearing, and the meagre ration of bread she had managed to get from a Polish relief agency. She chased the train for two weeks, right down to the Chinese border and

described searching up and down every train she came across. She travelled on foot, in the snow, still in canvas shoes, with only a piece of *lepioshka*, flat, unleavened bread, to sustain her through the journey.

I left at sunrise. As I was walking, the sole of my shoe came away so I had to walk barefoot until I came to a workshop where I hoped I might find some string or wire to tie my shoes up. The workshop was stripped bare and deserted, except for the caretaker, a Polish deportee of Jewish faith. He had a scarf around his neck which he took off to bind my shoe. That is how I got to Dzhalal-Abad before the sun went down. When I saw the Polish flags flying, I fell on my knees and kissed the ground over which the Polish colours were flying. There was a Polish priest running a relief centre for people like me. It wasn't much but they tried their best and advised me to leave that *kolhoz* and join the army before Easter, so I did and I finally left that part of the world with the army in August 1942.

In Pahlavi Maria found her youngest son in the cadets and from him she learned that her middle son had died. Maria was sent on to Tehràn with the promise that her youngest son would join her there. However, she was only in Tehràn three days before being sent to Ahvaz. Already ill with hepatitis and trachoma, there was nothing she could do except try to regain her strength before being sent to Karachi, where she launched an unsuccessful search for her eldest son. In February 1944 she was sent to Africa, to Makindu Camp in Kenya and then Tengeru Camp in Tanganyika where she was reunited with her youngest son Kazimierz in May 1944. In November, she received news from the Polish army that her eldest son had died in March 1941 in Guzar, soon after he had left his younger brothers.



Boy soldiers (junaks) 10 to 15 years of age, USSR, 1942

(Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)

As is clear from the Sosnowskis' story, there was little assistance to be gained *en route* in the

USSR and thousands perished on the way from starvation or disease. Those who survived travelled, stopped, slept on the stations or in parks, and tried to get food. The hot water available at most railway stations was about the only thing people could rely on. Aleksandra Wisniewska (née Rewaj), a child of 11 by the time the amnesty was declared, considered that for her the journey south was 'when all the trauma started. People were dying like flies from sickness and thirst. There was no regard for human beings. You only thought about yourself. Human beings are selfish in a way, especially when it is a matter of survival'. Her elder sister, Zdzislawa Wasylkowska, explained how her family lost all their identification papers on the journey south:

A friend of ours took all our papers to get bread for us-without the papers they wouldn't give you bread. This man missed the train on purpose. He just ran away leaving his wife and daughter in the carriage with us. We found out later that he had talked to the NKVD against my father, and that is why my father was arrested in Arkhangel'sk district. It was very hard after that and we were dreadfully hungry. We had to beg for bread or steal whenever we could. There were no washing facilities. There were lice everywhere and so many dead children. I saw many people thrown out from the train. It took us another month to get to Dzhahal-Abad, close to the Afghanistan border, but they did not want to take us. We moved on to Guzar where my mother and sister became sick with typhus.

Soon after that, the Rewaj family were separated, placed in different communal homes organised by the Polish relief agencies or in hospitals where 'body after body' gave way to starvation and disease. Zdzislawa Wasylkowska joined the *Junaks*, an 'army school' for Polish young people aged between 12 and 17 and it was in this way that she finally left the Soviet Union. Her mother and sister also survived, although she was not reunited with them until reaching Tehràn. Her father succumbed to typhus on 15 April 1942:

That was the only day I didn't visit him. It was miles across the city, and I had been there everyday. I sold the few things that we had left so I had some money which I used to buy an egg. I had to search all around to find a little firewood so I could cook it before I took it to him. The day before he died he said that he was dying but I thought he was confused. I came the next day and I was given his death certificate. I don't know where my father is buried. In the hospital they just loaded body after body on to a cart. They couldn't care less and I didn't have time to worry about it. The main thing was my life. I felt my father's death when I got to Africa but not at the time. When you are in a situation like that you don't have the same feelings that you have in real life. You think differently altogether.

The Southern *Kolhozes*

Once in the south the fate of the Polish refugees remained uncertain because there were so few facilities to deal with the influx of people. By the beginning of 1942, thousands of Polish refugees had made their way to the southern regions of the Soviet Union to congregate close to their army. This, however, was no guarantee of improved circumstances as civilians were being denied Soviet ration cards and starvation was common even in the army camps. By March, due to the difficulty of feeding these people, the Soviet Union finally agreed to Polish plans to evacuate 30 000 Polish military along with 10 000 members of their families (Królikowski, 1983, p. 66).

General Wladyslaw Anders, chosen by the Polish government in exile to command Polish forces

in the Soviet Union, had spent two years in the Lubyanka prison in Moscow and therefore had a deep mistrust of Stalin's regime. This was further justified when, by March 1942, only 70 000 soldiers had managed to make their way to his headquarters at Buzuluk, between the Volga and the Ural Mountains. Added to that was the notable absence of officers. Polish records indicated that 180 000 men, including 15 000 officers, had been taken prisoner by the USSR in 1939 (Ascherson, 1987, p. 120). Relations between the Polish government in exile and the Soviet Union had been tenuous from the start of their alliance and, according to Ascherson, relations deteriorated further when Anders moved the Polish forces towards the Caspian Sea and refused to send a division to the front on the grounds that they were under-armed and unfit for battle.

The Soviet authorities retaliated by cutting rations and conditions in the south deteriorated still further. Undeterred, and inspired by news of the March evacuation of Polish armed forces and their families, Poles continued their 'feverish stampede toward the south' (Królikowski, 1983, p. 66). The Polish army and government in exile were doing their best to organise aid and information for their compatriots and many adult refugees were seconded to positions with the various Polish relief agencies. Stan (Zbigniew) Patro recalled that after the remaining members of his family reached Bukhara, his mother got a job in an orphanage.

We stayed there until we left two months later. The orphanage had large dormitories, but the children were sick and each day some died from diseases such as malaria and dysentery. After starvation the children had no resistance at all. They were looked after by the Polish army but there was not enough food and no medicine so there was little one could do. I got very sick there and my grandfather got dysentery. Around this time we had to leave for Persia (Iran). Grandfather died on the train to Krasnovodsk. There was no funeral. They just removed his body at one of the stops.

Janusz Smenda, his mother Wladyslawa and sister Teresa eventually left the Soviet Union with one of these orphanages:

We ended up in Turkestan and Uzbekistan where the Polish units were being formed. There were a lot of Polish orphans because so many mothers died. Mother was approached to take charge of orphans and she accepted. Ultimately, the Polish army was moved out of the Soviet Union to Persia, to be under the British command, to be equipped and trained. This whole orphanage, and many others, were moved out with the army on one of the transports to Krasnovodsk, and from there on to the boat across the Caspian Sea to Pahlavi.

If women and children were able to find a relative who was in the army they had a greater chance of being able to settle temporarily near the various army headquarters. Jerzy Mazak's family discovered a relative who was with the Polish army in Tashkent:

We travelled south too. It was an interesting place and some significant things happened there. Being the headquarters for the army they started organising little schools, and prepared us for first holy communion and confirmation. A thing like that happening at Uzbekistan in the middle of the Soviet Union was unbelievable! Bishop Gawlina turned up from London and there was a big open air mass. There were very moving scenes in Tashkent because as the soldiers gained in strength they held a parade on the national feast day. Everyone made flags and banners and a band was organised from somewhere.

This happening so far away from Poland was fantastic, unbelievable.

But the vast majority of refugees were once again sent to *kolhozes* where they continued to work for rations. Perhaps the worst of these were in eastern Turkestan, in the Uzbek and Kirghiz republics (Królikowski, 1983, p. 46). Tadeusz Gruszka, then only a little boy of five, described his family's time in this region with disarming understatement as 'pretty bad'. The Gruszka family spent their whole period of deportation in the cotton fields and, to the youngest of the Gruszka family, the amnesty initially meant only a change of location.



Polish orphans in Uzbekistan, 1942
(Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)

From Kirghistan the Russian authorities shifted us to Uzbekistan. It was pretty similar. We were working in the cotton fields. I used to work behind my mother and father when they were picking cotton. It was something to do but it was hard work for a young fellow like me. Eventually, the Polish government got us out of there.

Many women took the risk of leaving these *kolhozes* without permission rather than remain isolated from news or the meagre assistance available at the Polish army relief centres. Relocated to an isolated *kolhoz* in Uzbekistan, 40 kilometres from the nearest *kolhoz* with large numbers of Poles, Elizabeth Patro explained that their diet consisted of pancake made from wheat chaff and some *lebioda*, pigweed, growing in the area. Consequently:

Almost every day, someone died. Once my sister Iza recovered from dysentery, my mother prepared us for a trip - on foot if necessary. Next morning when everyone was still asleep, we left our *kibitka* (hut). Mother carried a small bundle of clothes, some dried *uruk* (apricot) which was stolen, a bottle of water and three pancakes. Once we reached the hills the enormity of the task dawned on her. Forty kilometres of hilly terrain with three small children. The tears rolled down her hollowed cheeks and her hands trembled. She prayed. We three looked at her and did not speak. From time to time she urged us on. Eventually Talek, the youngest, started to cry, his feet were bleeding and he complained of being very tired and hungry. At first she chose not to listen. She fastened her strap and dragged the boy by the hand. It was well past noon when we stopped. She gave us half a pancake each and a few drops of water. She herself did not eat or drink. Sadly she looked

at her young son, took his tattered shoes off, unrolled her small bundle and retaining only the large shawl secured Talek to her back with the shawl. With half a bottle of water and one and a half pancakes we continued on our way. When dusk was falling Mother unashamedly cried aloud. Fortunately God must have listened. After a few more kilometres the trees became sparse, the path widened and over the next hill far in the distance we could see the lights of *Lenin Kolhoz*. It was dark when we were welcomed by our Polish friends. We all believed that for sure we would see our father - unfortunately it was not to be.

Irena Makowiecka told of how she and her mother arrived in Bukhara where they registered with a Polish relief agency and were given flour and a few other provisions. Soon after their group of eight families, who had travelled together from Siberia, were sent to the cotton fields because staying around Bukhara 'created a problem'. The adults cleaned up after the cotton harvest and prepared for the ploughing but after that there was no more work for the women and therefore no money to buy rations until the next harvest. They spent Christmas of 1941 in this *kolhoz*, walking the 22 kilometres to Bukhara to get rations from the Polish relief agency whenever their strength permitted. Everybody got typhoid and several friends died, including Irena's baby brother. Irena recalled that in April they were told to leave everything because they would be leaving Russia.

We took what we could carry and walked to Bukhara but we were left there again with nothing because Stalin got annoyed with the allies over something and used us as hostages. For the second time we were told, 'You have to leave Bukhara. You are not allowed to stay'. We were taken to another *kolhoz* which was even further away than the first one. There were only two Polish mothers and two children, myself and another boy. We stayed there among the Uzbeks who were very unfriendly. They hated Russians and they couldn't care less who we were.

My mother was very upset and worried. We had very little - one huge pillow which was my mother's wedding present from her mother, I still have that - and a few odd things. Mother had to go to work but again we were not paid or given anything and we were so far away from Bukhara that we couldn't go to the Polish centre to get help. It was spring by then so I used to make soup out of green weeds. I would add a green apricot for a bit of taste. I'm sure it was full of vitamins! We still had a bit of flour and some salt, although that was running out too, and we could buy a cup or two of milk so I would chop some weeds, add them to the flour and make little pancakes. I was a very imaginative cook! That's what we lived off daily for quite a few weeks.

Eventually in desperation we packed up and sneaked away in the middle of the night. We walked through kilometres of fragrant cherry and apricot orchards in full bloom, in beautiful moonlight. It was like a fairy tale, except for the hyenas. They were following us through the orchards. Their howl sounds like a child crying - sobbing and going higher and higher. It was bloodcurdling and such a contrast: the beautiful full moon, the beautiful trees dressed in white and pink and the horrible sound of hyenas. It was symbolic of all our life woes.

The reputation of many of these southern *kolhozes* was so bad that word spread to other Polish refugees. Tadeusz Dobrostanski told of how his mother chose an equally uncertain path in order to save herself and her sons from this fate. His mother, Janina, had the added advantage of

knowing that her husband had rejoined the Polish army and she was hopeful of being reunited with him if she remained close to the Polish relief agencies. When they were taken to Samarkand to work in the cotton fields they slipped away at night and spent time, camping with gypsies before moving to Uzbek, a village on the outskirts of Samarkand. Christmas Eve 1941 remains etched in his memory:

We didn't have anything to eat except a huge beetroot which Mother boiled. We had one slice for each person and we drank the water it was cooked in. My mother wasn't paying the landlord because she didn't have money and he started getting very nasty. Finally in January 1942 Mother went to the Polish centre in Samarkand with the hope of getting some buckwheat or bread and she bumped into my father. He was already in British battledress, with the army issue revolver. When our Uzbek landlord looked at my father he went crazy because in Russia a Commandant is almighty. So he killed a lamb and prepared an Uzbek dinner. Suddenly we were the VIPs! He said to forget about the money we owed him. We were all good friends!

Father managed to get accommodation for us in Samarkand. We had half a house, which was luxury, and he obtained coupons which enabled us to get food in the shops for officers. Then three of us got very sick with typhoid fever. Father got an extension to stay with us and he tended us throughout this time, getting medicine from a Jewish doctor who helped organise Red Cross medicines. With typhoid fever you reach a crisis after ten days and you either die or pull through. Father kept temperature charts of our progress. I still have these. Then, in February, by chance Father met up with mother's stepfather who was an elderly doctor. He took care of us after that and Father went back to his unit.

Tadeusz Dobrostanski went on to highlight the resourcefulness of his mother, even after she learned that his father had died of typhoid fever. Like so many women her main concern became the survival of her children.

She was a very resourceful woman, a very great optimist. Even in the bleakest times she would say, 'It will work out, don't worry about it'. I owe her my life because she saved me many times. Now I know how heroic she was, but she was not an exception. There were many hundreds and thousands of similar mothers. The scenery was slightly different but their stories were more or less the same.



Cotton fields near Bukhara, USSR
(Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)

In other families, children had to reverse the roles and looked after their mothers when they became sick. Bogdan Harbuz recalled how, when they reached Tashkent in Uzbekistan:

The NKVD decided we were not to go any further. There were thousands and thousands of people at the station, all trying to go somewhere but they had nowhere to go because there were no more trains. There were robberies and killings, but most of all people dying of hunger. People were forced to eat things they would never normally eat. I don't want to talk about it because it was so horrible.

His older sisters were sent to work on one *kolhoz* while he and his mother were sent to a Korean *kolhoz*:

In 1936, 5000 Koreans had been deported from Manchuria. When we arrived there were only 2000 still alive. In that short period of time 3000 of them died. At first, they were very aggressive and unfriendly because they thought we were Russian refugees. When they found out that we were Poles, deportees like them, they became quite friendly. My mother and I were left there with two other Polish families and soon after, my mother became sick with typhoid. There was no doctor or hospital. We were left as we were and our food rations were stopped because Mother could no longer work. The other Polish families must have been frightened of catching typhoid because when I tried to get close to them, to get help or some food, they chased me away with a stick. I know now that they were afraid but at the time it was very cruel. The only thing I could do was to go and pinch turnips from the Koreans, who left large bowls of turnips outside their houses to become sour. They ate it like sauerkraut. They chased me with sticks but they never caught me. It took me a long time to figure out that they didn't want to! Those turnips helped my mother and me, especially in the first weeks of her sickness when she was always thirsty. They seemed to act as medication.

He, like many others, also recalls the kindness of individual Russian officers or families who assisted them by providing food from their own meagre resources, 'I have a lot of gratitude towards Russian people. Even though in my heart they are enemies, as people they were at times very good'.

Leaving the USSR

People were desperate to leave the Soviet Union and many mothers took advantage of the Polish army's 'ploy' of enrolling children in the army as cadets, regardless of age or gender. While this was no doubt a pragmatic decision in the face of continuing uncertainty, it was clearly not an easy decision for many mothers to make. Like Ryszard Pawlowski's mother, these women had battled so hard to bring their families to safety and now the best prospect of saving their children was to hand them over to the care of the army.

Mother was getting desperate because it became obvious that only people who had somebody in the army would be allowed to leave Russia. We had no-one in the army so she went to the army chaplain in Vrevskoy for advice. He told her that her first obligation, her duty, was to try to save the children and advised Mum to enrol us into something like army cadets, only for kids a bit younger. It was mainly a means to get as many children out of Russia as possible. My brother and I left Russia with the army and

mother remained in Russia. She told us later how she stood crying as she watched the red light of the train disappear into the distance, not knowing if we would ever see each other again. We went to Krasnovodsk and were loaded onto a crowded ship. In the morning we arrived in Pahlavi and a few days later the mothers were also permitted to leave Russia so we were reunited. From there we went to one of the camps near Tehràn. We were no longer with the cadets. That was just a way of getting us out of Russia.

Throughout 1942, General Anders had increased pressure on the Polish government in exile to allow the evacuation of Polish troops to Iran where, along with their families, they would come under British control. General Sikorski, leader of the Polish government in exile, was reluctant to evacuate all the Polish forces because he wanted a free Polish army in the east to inhibit Soviet intentions in Poland. He also believed that the presence of the Polish army would 'act as a magnet and refuge for thousands of Poles still missing' in the Soviet Union (Ascherson, 1987, p. 121). Stalin understood this and encouraged Anders' evacuation plans, while Churchill needed more troops in Egypt, so he also urged Sikorski to evacuate as many Poles as possible.



Quetta, 1942: Polish children evacuated from Aschabad, USSR, to India (Courtesy of Tadeusz Dobrostanski)

A few hundred children, mostly orphans, left the Soviet Union in army trucks organised by the Polish government in exile and the Red Cross. Their epic overland journey to India left Aschabad in Turkmenistan, took them over the border to Mashhad in Iran, then around the southern border of Afghanistan to Zahedau and Quetta in present day Pakistan. At the invitation of the Indian government, they then travelled by train to Bombay and then Jamnagar (see Chapter 5).

But the vast majority of Poles, totalling between 114 500 and 115 000 soldiers and civilians (Królikowski, 1983, p.67; Ascherson, 1987, p.120), left the Soviet Union during the summer of 1942 in transports which left from Krasnovodsk on the Caspian Sea. Camping on the sand along the edges of an oil polluted Caspian Sea, conditions in Krasnovodsk were as poor as anything most refugees had experienced, eased only by the prospect of imminent departure. Forced to leave most of their few remaining possessions behind before they boarded the ships, only a few survivors managed to smuggle out any documentary evidence of their time in the Soviet Union. Helena Lancucka described the circumstances in which she and her son left the Soviet Union:

We were taken to a place that was surrounded by barbed wire. It was very hot, there was no water and the Caspian Sea was very dirty. Children who drank that water became very ill. Afterwards they put us on a merchant ship with very deep holds. They were not for people. It was so crowded and I was still very sick with dysentery so we stayed on the deck, with all the sick people. It was awful. Worse than animals. You could not move and some people were so sick they couldn't control themselves. There were a lot of accidents. The smell was terrible and nobody could clean it up. Nobody cared because we were just happy to be on the ship. We were just waiting to go.

While 'the evacuation to Iran was seen by many Poles as a divine mercy, a flight from Babylonian captivity', over a million Poles remained in the Soviet Union (Ascherson, 1987, pp. 121-2). People who were among the last to leave remembered the desperation of those who could not get aboard the last transports:

This ship was the last transport from Krasnovodsk and people were packed on board in the coal holds. Polish soldiers started to remove possessions so that more people would fit, but still some were left behind. Everyone was aware that this was the last boat so people jumped into the water to swim after the boat. They all drowned. (Zbigniew Patro)

For Poles who had not managed to leave the Soviet Union during the evacuations of 1942, chances of doing so diminished. Relations between Stalin and the Polish government in exile deteriorated still further until, after the discovery of the bodies of Polish officers at Katyn in April 1943, the Soviet Union broke off relations with the Polish government in exile completely. Although further uncertainty awaited the Poles who had managed to escape the Soviet Union, they at least had hope of something brighter. Janusz Smenda summed up the sentiments of many of his compatriots when they knew they were to leave the Soviet Union:

I was absolutely joyous when I knew we were going to be freed. I was eleven and a bit, but even at that age I knew that people who stayed in Russia led an impossible life. I was frightened that all of a sudden I would have to become a labourer all my life, living in a system that I absolutely hated, with people who had persecuted my mother and prosecuted my father, even though I didn't know then that he was dead. I saw no future and that was frightening. When we finally got on to Persian soil I knew we were out and that they couldn't change it. It was a total sense of relief and rejoicing. After that I didn't actually care where we went as long as it was as far away from Russia as possible.

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[Chapter 5](#)