



WŁADYSŁAW GANTEK

1. Personal data:

Senior Rifleman Władysław Gantek, born in 1896, a farmer by occupation, married, before the War an employee of the Polish Post and Telegraph. On 1 September 1939 I was mobilized and assigned to the Main (Polish) Post Office, no. 4. When the Soviets crossed our borders, I decided that I wouldn't be working for them and therefore made some arrangements – with the full knowledge of the Postmaster of Post Office Kowal 1.

2. Date and circumstances of arrest:

On 10 February 1940 at 4.00 a.m. five Soviet soldiers and six militiamen recruited from amongst the residents of the village of Krymno, district of Kamień Koszyrski, surrounded my house. Four of the Soviet bandits barged into the flat shouting: "*Hands up!*". They searched the entire house, and body searched me and my wife. During this procedure, which was carried out by two of the scoundrels, another two stood with their revolvers pointed at me and my wife. The children were still in bed, half asleep, and although they didn't know what was going on, they were too drowsy to scream. One of the rouges pulled them off the bed and pushed them into my room, saying that he would open fire if they moved.

Obviously, I had already removed the weapons which I had been hiding at home and concealed them in the forest, where they will safely remain until they can be used for their proper purpose.

Having performed the search, the senior of the two men told me that he was a member of the NKVD and acted with its full authorization, whereupon he announced that my whole family must be made ready to travel within half an hour.

When I asked where they were taking us, he replied that not far away, to a place where we would have better living conditions.

We were allowed to take clothes and a little food, however the soldiers stressed that the luggage per person must not exceed 16 kilograms, and that anything above this limit would be confiscated. The rest of our property – the Bolshevik zealot explained – would be sent to the new location. (It appears that our assets are being "sent" to this day).



When the half-hour deadline passed, our children were forced out of the house. The youngsters were directed towards some sleighs, while the teenagers were led on foot – together with myself – to Pniewno train station. I thought that my family and I had been specially chosen by the Soviet authorities, for we lived some way away from our neighbors and I therefore couldn't see what was going on at their farmsteads. But alas, I was soon horrified to observe that hundreds of settler families had already been gathered at the station.

Lamentations and terrified sobs echoed round the square in front of the station; some were saying goodbye to those who had not been evicted, others were shedding tears over the poor souls dying on the sleighs – for the Soviets had even torn the seriously ill from their familial nests – while others still picked up some earth in handkerchiefs and kissed it, bidding a sorrowful farewell to their homeland – to which they would never return.

A harrowing and grave moment was drawing nigh. We continued to wait. To make matters worse, there was a hard frost and a blizzard raged around us, growing stronger and stronger; it seemed as if God himself had abandoned us. The cries of the children, hungry and freezing, served only to heighten the horror.

After 24 hours, a narrow-gage train pulled up and we were loaded aboard, the men separately from the women and children, some 50 – 60 people to each wagon. It was so crowded that after a few hours the weaker among us started fainting from the heat – in spite of the strong frost outside.

As it turned out, these wagons had been specially prepared for the "cargo", and all the windows were boarded shut. Guards were milling around, and you could hear shouts and cries: "Water!", "Help!" – but they were futile, for by now no one was allowed to come near the train. The local populace tried to approach, carrying bread and milk for our poor children, and the guards threatened to open fire; people cried over our lot.

Having seen the first signs of the "freedoms of the working classes", so proudly touted by the communists, the native civilians started lamenting their fate, while some cursed at the Red Army soldiers. Locomotives were then attached and the train drove off in the direction of the narrow-gage station of Kamień Koszyrski. Here, fresh wagons – known in Russian as *tieplushki* [heated goods wagons] – were waiting for us. During the change of train I determined that the entire district had been decimated, for not only had all the settlers been removed, but also



every last forester of the State Forestry Service and all the gamekeepers from the numerous private estates.

Families were gradually reunited and then joined into groups numbering some 60 – 70 people, which were subsequently placed in individual wagons.

The wagons were equipped thus: two metal stoves, double-decker plank beds on both sides, while in the very center of the floor there was a hole – our toilet. The windows were barred or boarded shut. After all the wagons had been filled, the doors were closed and we lost sight of our Homeland. It remained in our memory, however, along with the emotions in our hearts, with the longing and the yearning, and the burning desire to take revenge for the crimes committed against our country, for the deceitful collusion – the Soviets' traitorous friendship with Germany – that had resulted in the partition of Poland. And so, with these feelings and emotions coursing through our bodies, my family and I were deported to the far north, to the Siberian taiga – and immediately instructed by our enslavers to forget about Poland for good! The scoundrels! Barbarians, who want to spread their plague upon the world; poverty and hunger – keep away from us!

3. Name of the camp, prison, place of forced labor:

The settlement to which we and some 55 – 56 other families were deported was called *Siderga*, and it was situated in the Kargopolsky District of the Arkhangelsk Oblast.

4. Description of the camp, prison:

The settlement was located in a forest clearing. The terrain was flat, with a clay and stone surface, while a small mountain river with a strong current – the Yavzora, a tributary of the much larger Pinega – flowed nearby.

The whole settlement comprised six barracks, four of which were intended as housing; each of these had eight rooms of different dimensions, namely four by five meters (20 square meters) or five by six meters (30 square meters). They had been made from logs – either carelessly or without due knowledge of carpentry – by the Tartars, who had previously lived on the Volga and been deported here in 1930.

Two or three families – 14 to 16 people – were allocated to each room.



In actual fact these were ruins, and should have housed reptiles, not people. The window panes were shattered into 10 – 15 fragments, which soon fell out leaving you with a large hole, the doors were roughly hewn, as if with an ax, while the stoves were dilapidated. We felt devastated just looking at these hovels. When cooking food (or rather water, for there was nothing else) the residents would be choked by the smoke, and so you would have to open the door – but then everyone shivered with cold, particularly the poor children, for the frost was no joke: minus 45 – 50 degrees Celsius, sometimes more. The north Russian winter lasts eight months, and for us – deported and abandoned – it felt like an eternity. All the barracks were infested with bugs and cockroaches, while to make matters worse the toilets were located in the corridors, so there was a horrible stench. Obviously, we were not provided with any disinfectants. The road ran straight between the barracks, and as it was frequently used as a stopping point by the carters who brought in hay or flour, and groats and kasha for the horses that we used to transport fallen logs, the entire area of the settlement was littered with horse dung, rotting feed and assorted wastes.

5. Social composition of POWs, prisoners, deportees:

The majority of deportees in the settlement were military settlers (Poles), civil servants, local government functionaries, foresters of the State Forestry Service, and gamekeepers from private estates; the latter were in the main Ruthenians and had different social and national leanings, which means that they were no friends of our nation.

Their intellectual level was at best average, for these were primarily people from lands of the former Russian Partition, where education had never been considered important, and indeed much effort had gone into keeping the Poles who resided there in ignorance. There were also those who due to the World War had not completed their studies, having been enlisted and sent to fight as youngsters.

The moral fiber of the deportees – and us Poles in particular – was sufficiently high.

Mutual relations between us were good, but because the camp authorities were strictly opposed to us meeting and mingling, we had to stick to the confines of our individual families. Friendship was manifested during work, which was carried on in larger groups known as "brigades". We were taught these principles of social life by the Tartars, who worked with us shoulder to shoulder in the forests. Our relations with them were very friendly.



These people, whose fate was similar to ours – a merciless deportation, albeit from the banks of the Volga – had experienced the wild horror of Bolshevism firsthand. Initially, their conditions had been a lot worse than ours, for when they had arrived there in the middle of winter, there were no buildings standing – with the exception of a barrack for the guards. The poor Tartars sought refuge in shelters which they built in haste from spruce twigs; such was their accommodation for the entire winter! Under these terrible conditions, exacerbated by the extreme frost and inescapable hunger, their youngest children soon perished. As proof, when I went to the settlement of *Waganik* as a carpenter to help repair their barracks, one of the Tartars showed me the graves that had accumulated over the past ten years. I simply could not believe my eyes. I deeply regret that I did not count the mounds carefully, however when I tried to do so my companion – clearly superstitious – ordered me to stop. He only said that the initial group of deportees had numbered 680, of whom maybe thirty men had managed to escape – but it was unknown whether or not they had been caught later on. When we were having our conversation, 328 Tartars were alive, and among them some newborns, so it was difficult to determine the number of those who had died – I think that 320 would have been an accurate guess. In any case, only the physically strongest survived, the rest perished of disease and emaciation.

These people had become familiar with all the methods used by the NKVD, and when we were brought in they gave us immeasurable assistance, telling us how to behave in contacts with our overseers, what means they used to buy people over, and how one could recognize such traitors. Put very simply, the information which they passed on was priceless, and helped many of us Poles avoid further repressions.

6. Life in the camp, prison:

At 5.00 a.m. one of the guards would start beating a plank of wood to wake us up. This was the first signal, while when the second was sounded, at 7.00 a.m., we were supposed to come out into the square, arrange ourselves in brigades, and march off to work.

We mainly worked on tree felling, with the logs – the product of our backbreaking labor – being intended both for domestic use and export.

There were other types of work, too, such as building new and repairing existing barracks, sawing planks, making and burning bricks, constructing roads, clearing fields, mowing meadows, and a great many others.



Length of the working day. Officially, laborers were supposed to work eight hours, but when a forest brigade (or any other brigade for that matter) finished after eight hours – and even if it had carried out the norm – it would be paid as low a price as possible [for its output], while its members would be told that they had worked poorly and would therefore not receive any more money (*you must work harder to earn more*). Each type of job was covered by a quota – prudently, these were not fulfilled, for if they had been, then next day they would have been increased.

Remuneration was based on a classification of materials [produced], which was different for the workers and different for the administrators; the laborers would be robbed at every turn.

The daily wage of a forest worker didn't exceed three to five rubles. Working conditions were very difficult. The distances between our settlement and the places where we worked would range from four to eight kilometers, and the time of our morning departure was always set in such a way that we would be at the location by 8.00 a.m. Temperatures as low as minus 42 degrees Celsius were not considered a hindrance; they would have to fall to minus 43 – 45 degrees for a laborer to be allowed to refuse to go to work. Neither blizzards nor downpours were viewed as obstacles to tree felling – only windstorms were so classified; such were the tenets of Soviet safety techniques (always those blasted "techniques"!). And if you failed to go to work, you would be charged with *progul* [unauthorized absence from work], tried, and punished as follows: for the first offense, 25 percent of your remuneration would be deducted for the Soviet state over a period of three to five months, while for a second absence, caused by factors such as exhaustion or a simple cold (in other words by an illness that does not result in fever) and therefore considered as simulation and punishable as an instance of *progul* – a year of forced labor, and thereafter a term of five, ten or fifteen years imprisonment. No one in that country is free to express his opinions or views – although this freedom is enshrined in the constitution of *Stalin, our eminently wise leader. We, the laborers, lead beautiful and happy lives as free citizens in the land of the Soviets!*

Duplicity! Slavery on a scale hitherto unknown in the history of man. Extreme poverty and pauperism, and the slow death of starving people, bereft of hope and any security of existence. No one is certain whether tomorrow he shall receive his bread ration – the commandant of the settlement may lower it, or indeed take it away altogether. He and his cronies are the masters of life and death. They can deprive you of everything without having



to put you before court – that is what they did with the Tartars, who were summoned one night and never returned.

Food rations determined arbitrarily for laborers and children, changed on the whim of the NKVD: 500 grams of bread for workers, and 300 grams for children and the elderly. A kilo of porridge for a laborer for a whole month! While for children and the elderly – 500 grams; sugar for laborers – 500 grams per month, and for children and the elderly – just 200 grams. All my purchases for my entire family (seven people) over a period of 18 months amounted to no more than 8 kilograms of potatoes, 6 kilograms of dried fish and 2 kilograms of meat from emergency slaughter. That was how much I was allowed to buy. But those who started cooperating with the NKVD received unlimited quantities of bread, oil, fish, meat and kasha. I will touch upon this issue later.

Clothes. Ostensibly, every worker could buy two sets of clothes a year – one for the summer and one for winter. I should stress, however, that he could do so only if the commandant of the settlement allowed him to. It all depended on a laborer's past, on his loyalty to the Soviet system, and the position which he enjoyed back home – all this data was very well known (obviously thanks to spies) to the NKVD and the commandant. And finally, if you were allowed to purchase clothes (because you had none in which you could go to work), you might still not be able to make the purchase after all, for you would then have no cash left for bread. Example prices of clothing: a donkey jacket – 55 rubles, trousers (regular) – 35 rubles per pair, quilted trousers – 65 rubles. That was the winter set; the summer set would be sold as two meters of drill for trousers, which quantity was always insufficient to make a new pair – it would just be enough to repair your old pants. Take the following example: over 18 months I was sold seven meters of low quality cloth for five people, barely enough to repair our underwear. In a word, each representative of the working classes shivered in his rags, which were unable to hide his body, purple with cold! Stooped under the burden of life and his eyes staring at the ground, you would never see a smile on his face. You could learn everything about the great freedoms of the Soviet paradise just by looking at his withered frame.

As regards social relations, it is difficult to say. People were forced to live in semi-isolation, shut off from others in the confines of their family circle, for even the most innocent visit to a neighboring room was viewed with suspicion, as a meeting aimed at organizing sabotage, while gathering in groups – large or small, it made no difference –



was strictly forbidden. Even on days off (on holy Sunday) you were not allowed to get together for joint prayers in another family's room. There were those who reported every single step we took, and so only at our place of work could we express our feelings of friendship, removing the mask of feigned ignorance and giving each patriotic member of the settlement the attention that he deserved. More importantly still, we could then determine who the traitors amongst us were, and exchange news received from Poland and our distant families, and also from abroad. Finally, we would be able to sing patriotic songs; indeed, we could talk and discuss everything that concerned us Poles and our homeland, for the Soviets could not accuse us of organizing a gathering at our place of work, now could they?

It was there that colleagues and friends came together, while the traitors were kept isolated, unable to eavesdrop on our conversations.

7. Attitude of the authorities, NKVD towards Poles:

As regards the approach of the NKVD to our people, I must say that these cunning dogs would quickly find their victim – a person devoid of moral fiber – and politely proceed to an interview concerning his co-prisoners. The conversation would start with some innocuous questions, for example: How is life in the land of the Soviets? How are you faring? The simple answer, "good", would be countered with the reply – "well, not so good, there is a war on".

And the next question – do you know Gantek (or someone else)? Who is he and what was his job in Poland? What organizations did he belong to? And what does he say about the Soviets? And by the way – do you have enough food? And the wages, are they all right? Do you have enough money? If he was considered suitable to trade away his brothers, then right the next day he would receive a larger ration of bread, sugar, oil, fish, barley groats, cigarettes. The scoundrel would be sent from one labor brigade to another, eavesdropping on what people said about Poland, the Soviets, Germany, etc. But it was good that the Soviets distinguished these traitors so, for we would find them out without fail.

While those who didn't provide any information and behaved in an upright manner, as Poles should, continued to suffer hunger and deprivation; we knew that such a person was one of us, and in any case he would recount the course of his interrogation in detail.



After seven months we lost three of our colleagues in this way, namely: 1. Józef Jabłoński, a military settler from Rudka Lubieszowska, district of Kamień Koszyrski, Poleskie voivodeship, who currently serves in the army; he is in England, in the Reserve of the Supreme Commander; 2. Król – I don't remember his name – a forester of the State Forestry Service, forest administration region of Nujno, commune and district of Kamień Koszyrski, Poleskie voivodeship; I don't know his current whereabouts; 3. A gamekeeper from the private forests of Count Władysław Krasicki, Worokomle estate, commune of Wielka Głusza, district of Kamień Koszyrski, Poleskie voivodeship, whose surname I don't know.

Once the information provided by such traitors about a third party was gathered, the hapless man would be summoned and interrogated. If he admitted to nothing, he would be put under permanent surveillance and every so often – whether in day or at night, in any case when free from work – interrogated by the commandant of the settlement. Those who resisted would have their food rations lowered and their remuneration reduced. I experienced this myself, thanks to the disloyal behavior of a member of the Association of Military Settlers.

These were extremely torturous methods of interrogation, because their effects were felt not only by the person being examined, but also by his entire family, for its food supply would be reduced suddenly and significantly. Methods typical of the NKVD, which give terrifying results.

No corporeal punishment could be as painful as watching your loved ones slowly die of hunger. Various thoughts come into your head, and you start thinking that if only you admit your guilt – admit to something that you never did – you will save your family's lives. This spiritual fight sucks out the last droplets of one's physical strength – and you are only suffering this torment because of the behavior of a few denunciators, colleagues who had sold themselves for a slice of bread and a little fat.

Communist propaganda. Each week the Soviets held "red meets", during which they tried to make us believe that Poland was not even worth thinking about, declaring that it doesn't exist and will never be reborn, and that we have no choice but to live and die here. The Bolshevik and communist indoctrinators tried to portray our politicians and government in the worst light possible. When we openly protested against this, they would say that we were defenders of the Polish "masters" and "lords", joking that Poland was by then no more than a pipe-dream.



8. Medical care, hospitals, mortality rate:

There was practically no medical care available to workers. The doctor was there for one purpose only – and it was not to treat the sick. Namely, if a laborer failed to turn up for work citing ill health, the doctor would come over and measure his or her temperature, and if it was over 38 degrees Celsius, he would issue a sick note exempting the poor soul from work for one to three days.

Sometimes he had aspirin tablets, valerian drops, or peppermint drops. These “medicines” would be used to treat each and every sickness, while iodine – the most needed – was the least available.

Patients didn’t summon the doctor, for if they failed to report for work, one of the militiamen would inform the commandant of the settlement, and he would accompany the doctor on his visit. If a patient didn’t have a fever, he would be marched off to work immediately, while in the event of even a 10-minute delay he would be tried for *progul*; furthermore, his food ration would be reduced as punishment for simulating.

There were hospitals in practically every settlement. However, only those who were on the verge of death would be admitted, and their stay lasted three or four, at most five days. For these “patients”, the hospital differed from the outside world in that they received two or three glasses of milk per day, and sometimes even a little broth. The building that housed the hospital was not purpose-built; in fact, the word *bolnica* [hospital] disguised no more than a single, regular barrack-room containing two or three beds (pallets filled with straw) covered with slightly dirty linen (some sheets and blankets).

Mortality. There were a great many deaths amongst the Polish deportees, and children accounted for the majority. I do not remember the children’s ages or all the surnames, but I will mention those that I do.

Wiśniewski’s two daughters,

the son of Władysław Bednarek (a note with the cause of death has been placed in a bottle left in his grave),

the daughter of Gałczyński from Czerwisz,

Hofman’s son,

Rutkowski’s daughter,



Next – three surnames of adults, which I happen to remember to this day:

Stanisław Jakl, 47 years old,

Maria Tomaszewska, 36 years old (a note with the cause of death has been placed in a bottle left in her grave),

Wiśniewska.

Over a period of 18 months, 24 people out of a total number of 380 died of various diseases and due to the lack of medical care. The cemetery – where those whom I have just mentioned are interred – lies some 900 – 1,000 meters north-west of the settlement and north of the Yavzora River, practically at the same distance, in the center of a forest clearing. The Polish graves are marked with crosses, and also carry inscriptions; some contain bottles with documents and statements as to the cause of death.

9. Was it at all possible to keep in touch with the home country and your family? If yes, then what contacts were permitted?

It was possible to keep in touch with the home country mainly through letters, however very few reached the settlement. Our families informed us that they were writing every week, while I myself – and my period of incarceration in the North lasted 18 months – received no more than three letters. The conclusion would be that some guardian angels were intercepting the mail. This is how we termed the NKVD – “guardian angels”, for it was they who were seizing our correspondence. Sometimes mail would be delivered through a liaison – people said that this courier was a railwayman in Soviet employ who was in touch with our friends working at the station in Arkhangelsk. He would usually pass on oral information, although some of my colleagues received letters from their families that didn’t have stamps or any other markings, and this leads me to think that the “courier” did in fact exist. Information from Poland sent through this source always reached us quickest. A normal letter sent by a family member through the regular Soviet postal service would arrive after as many as three, four, five or even eight months.

10. When were you released and how did you get through to the Polish Army?

I was released on 5 September 1941. I left the North – together with my family – at my own expense. It was quite a risky move, for there were no means of communication, and the



Soviet authorities didn't give us any assistance other than issuing release documents. Hiring horses was an impossibility, for every last mount had been appropriated by the Red Army. And although when we finally reached the Pinega on our rafts we might have been able to buy some old boat in one of the kolkhozes on the shore, this would have taken a lot of time, for we would have to have scoured the area for a suitable vessel – one that would not immediately take us to the bottom of the river. Furthermore, prices were prohibitively high, while we had no more than a few hundred rubles – earned by bartering our last pieces of clothing, brought with us from Poland and saved for an emergency – for the whole trip.

The distance to the Northern Dvina – a river regularly navigated by steamers – was 478 kilometers. Luckily for us, the Yavzora, a small albeit lively watercourse, flowed right by the settlement. Having loaded our small raft with care, for the Yavzora's channel is very shallow, we used it to complete the initial stage of our journey. It soon turned out that it was most fortunate that we were returning from the North as part of a larger group of 23 families, distributed between the same number of tiny rafts.

The rafts would frequently hit rocks and become immobilized, and without the help of others your voyage would have ended right there. Before entering the larger Pinega, we enlarged our rafts, while some lashed two or even more rafts together, thereby creating a single vessel. But even though I took all due precautions and was aware of what a large river could do during stormy weather, it quickly became apparent that our rafts were too small, and the water would rise up to our knees. Taking into consideration that we were traveling in the Northern autumn, this was a most unpleasant experience.

Sometimes it seemed as if our wandering would end abruptly, at the bottom of the waterway. At such moments, however, the cries of our children would cause me and my colleagues to summon up the last reserves of strength, reinvigorating our will to make landfall. The specter of death never fails to impress itself on your mind, and especially so if you are responsible for the lives of children. There were times when my fellow travelers wanted to abandon the journey altogether, seeing as it had become exceptionally arduous and dangerous in its second half. But the desire to free our little ones from the clutches of the Russian North gave me strength, and I considered it my duty to have a positive influence on my colleagues.



Finally, in October, the seven-week odyssey came to an end. Towards the end of that month I reached Tatishchevo, where I reported as a volunteer, ready to give my all for the Polish Army. I was enlisted in the 5th Infantry Division. But the Army Recruitment Commission then asked about my family, which I had not taken with me to Tatishchevo, leaving them with no security some distance away. I was advised to return and place them [illegible], and thereafter inform the Commission of my address and wait for a call-up.

Although the wait was long, right until the end of February in fact, I was not disappointed. On 26 February 1942, a special delegate arrived at the [illegible] and took a few families – among them mine – with him, approximately 90 people.

In Tatishchevo we were attached to a military convoy and sent to Iran. Only there were I and my son enlisted in the Polish Army; to be precise, my boy volunteered, and I am extremely grateful to the Army Command for accepting him.

Official stamp, 19 February 1943