

KAZIMIERA JAWORSKA

Volunteer Kazimiera Jaworska, 43 years old (born in 1900), military administration clerk, unmarried.

I got arrested in my private apartment, on Mickiewicza Street 6 in Grodno, on the night between 20 March 1940 and 21 March 1940. During a two-hour search, they seized my maps, personal documents, and a notebook, and I was ordered to leave without any belongings. The first interrogation was conducted after a 20-hour wait in the NKVD detention room. Then I was informed that I was accused of belonging to the Polish Military Organization, of propaganda, terror, an intent to detach Belarus from the Soviet territory, and espionage. The accusations were backed with evidence found in my house – a weapon license with its validity prolonged for the war period, maps of Rome, Naples, and Berlin, a foreign passport [granting entrance] to Italy from 1937, and some notes from the journey. I was also told that I was arrested and I would stay in jail until the investigation concluded. After a very thorough search and confiscation of my valuable watch (which they did not return), I was put in cell no. 9, where I met a 16-year-old scout, who'd been caught putting up posters [calling for] boycott of the Soviet school. After a week, I was sent to Minsk under strict supervision. I was closed there in the main prison (former Szujski princes' palace) in cell no. 54. In the basement of the three- or four-story building, there were dark cells, punishment cells and *sliedowatiels'* rooms. The investigation went on for 10 months. Throughout that time, I was moved from the main prison to one of the wings, had been in a couple of other cells, and, finally, I was sentenced in absentia to eight years of labor camps (*isprawitielno-trudowyj łagier*) and deported to Karlag (Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp). It took about a month before we reached Karabas, a prisoner distribution station. I was sent to Prystorna from there after a couple of weeks. By accident or design, I was separated from Poles and found myself among Russian women, usually sentenced for different kinds of general offenses like thievery, prostitution, *proguł*, etc. After more than a dozen hours of train journey, we went on foot, hungry and cold, through muds and pathless tracts, to the Burma point camp. We had to wait for another week, just on bread and water, as the

roads ahead were impenetrable. Finally, knee deep in the mud, we reached our destination. By the end of May 1941, I was sent to a sheep farm not too far away, and two months later, as a punishment, I was brought back and put under *konwojka*. What for? I still don't know. Probably because I was going to be released by the end of August, so for the sake of a full *pieriewospitanij*, I was to explore that correction facility as well. However, I wasn't meant to finish my Soviet education just then, as I had to survive six more months in freedom before I managed to get into the Polish Army. I consider this period as the hardest to live through, despite theoretical freedom and the possibility to work and earn money. I spent that time in Turkestan district, Kanczuk-sovkhoz, Kushata no. 1 Burgiem. I applied to join the Women Auxiliary Service twice, and it was only on 29 February 1942 that I received a telegraph call to army headquarters in Jangijul.

a) The prison in Minsk was characterized by truly unusual capacity. In a 3x5 meter cell, there were five iron beds, *parasza*, *tumboczka*, and 16 women. Two or three women slept on every bed, the rest slept on the floors in the passage or at the door, or stayed on guard in the *parasza*, taking turns. In another cell, a bit wider and with no beds, more than twenty of us lied in each row, in a way that our legs, tucked up, would touch another person's legs. It was dangerous to raise your body at night at any time for any reason, as the place would immediately "swell" and if you didn't want to cause a major fuss, you had to sit on the *parasza* until morning, unless somebody changed you. The cement floor was wet from the humidity dripping down the walls. As a proof of great mercy, for good behavior, we were given four or five ragged blankets, which we laid on the floor. I didn't have anything to cover myself with, as even my costume jacket with a fur lining was taken from me for safekeeping (for hygienic reasons). I used my neighbor's cover. In some cells, there were boards on the cement floor, which we considered an extreme convenience, as they would not only isolate us from the chill and dampness, but also served as a material to produce needles, knits, crochet hooks, etc. We received food in the morning, around 600 grams (700 after having been tried) of thick, black bread, two sugar cubes (in the first months) and boiling water, as much as one wanted. At noon and in the evening, a soup (*krupnik* from pearl barley, millet or halved oat, *szczy* from rotten cabbage, and beet soup). In the beginning, you could find a hairy morsel in the soup, an eye or a tooth that came from an animal, or often a *kamsa*, that is a small smelly fish, whose odor was making us sick. As the supply of clay bowls was insufficient for all the prisoners, we would eat in shifts, in cells order, from the same bowls, often unwashed. We lacked vegetables, fruits and fats the most, so after a couple of

months we got rashes, ulcers and other avitaminosis symptoms. Few of us had the chance to treat it with vitamin C or onion, which – if it only surfaced in a cell – was priceless, and you wouldn't stand a chance even to lick or at least smell it. With time, other illnesses started, like diarrhea, scabies, and general stress exhaustion. From time to time, a couple of people would be allowed to see the doctor, who – after a brief examination or just by taking a look, evaluated what the patient lacked and sent them back to the cell. In the winter, rarely (once a month), and more often in the summer, we were let out for 10–15 minutes walks (*progulkas*), which we returned from even more dispirited and drained.

Bedbugs were plaguing the prison. One of the prisoners, an attorney in the civil life, disposed of around one hundred and fifty bedbugs, which were wandering around the walls, ceiling and to our beds back and forth, in one hour. Lice were less of a threat, as each of us had lots of time to look in our hair for them. We learned to distinguish the local lice from the newcomers, describing their place of origin by their slenderness, the shape of their abdomen, the color of their skin, the way of moving and the level of maliciousness. The worst part was satisfying our natural needs, however. They led us out to an *ubornoj* twice a day. There were two taps and three lavatory ditches there. The cement floor was slightly descending into the middle, where a sewage hole was located. We were washing our naked bodies in the freezing cold water, for it was the only way to give them stimuli to live and function. For getting the whole thing done, we would be given 10–15 minutes, which we considered a huge amenity, as men, who came in higher numbers, had less time for that. The results of that hustle could be seen beside the walls of *ubornoj*, and if we wanted to somehow withstand this, we had to clean them with our own hands. It got even worse if the drain pipes got clogged. The sewage would flood the room, and its stream would often go along the corridor and even reach the nearby cells. In spite of all this, *uborna* was every prisoner's dream, being the only place where we could fulfill our needs – not just the physical, but also the spiritual ones, where we could exchange information with our companions in misery, hear political news, send gifts, mail, or bread, find lost relatives or friends, cheer each other up. The walls were thoroughly cleaned, but after a couple of days they would be covered with inscriptions in various languages, symbols, Morse code, etc. again. Walls were engraved with pieces of glass or nails, and later, when a huge number of soldiers and Soviet officers entered the prison in Minsk, we could also use pencils that they left behind, the most precious treasure. The punishment for writing or reading was the isolation cell, but that discouraged nobody.

The prison regime forbade lying or sleeping during the day, as well as loud conversation, singing, crying, and praying. From 4 a.m. to 9 p.m. we had to sit and think, and there was a lot to think about. Every message from *ubornoj* or tap on the wall by our neighbors was a topic for never ending discussions, conclusions and persuasion. Coming back from an interrogation was the most interesting thing, although the most upsetting, too. A person would be called in before the supper, and would come back at 2 or 3 a.m. Interrogations during the day weren't held often; the night was an ally to the people who judged us. When called, I would go with the janitor to the lodge, and into one of the *sliedowatiels'* rooms, where I sat on a stool with my hands rested on my knees and waited. A more or less turbulent questioning would follow, depending on the mood and the method used at the time. There were several of them – they would try each, depending on the needs. First, I was threatened to be executed right away (an expressive gesture made with a gun accompanied this), that I would rot in prison, that I would be subject to unprecedented tortures, they put a fist in front of my face – but I would not be beaten. I was sworn at and called names inappropriate to quote, which usually accompanied the interrogations, and one time they were actually the main topic of a short, one-hour sit-down. They threatened to harm my family, promised freedom, marriage, and a job *po specjalnosti* in the Soviet Soyuz. They assured me Poland would be no more, as that funny little state was only a stupid fantasy of the Treaty of Versailles. It drove them mad to hear that Poland had been and would be, because it had its government, its nation, and it was just temporarily occupied by its neighbors, but we would survive that too. They said our government had sold us to the Germans, that the commander-in-chief ran off, and we would all die out in prisons and labor camps. That even though there was some general Sikorski somewhere, they would get him, put him in a cage and show a "Polish brother" around the world. Others, more conciliatory, would say that Poland would exist, but red, within the Soviet territory, Soviets being the only ones who could secure freedom, order and safety for everybody. Even before the German-Bolshevik war, they thought Hitler was their deadly enemy, and that sooner or later they would have to fight him until the revolution in Germany broke out, and then the Red Army would take over favorable France, communist Spain, and this way they would become the lords of all of Europe. Sometimes they talked to me in a humane way, too. They asked about the relations in Poland, especially the economy, about the education, [illegible], art and sport. It was a discussion, but they were carefully picking up all the pieces of information. They were really skeptical about excursions abroad, and because one of my charges concerned

that, I had to tell them in a detailed way who sent me and what for, who paid for it, how I crossed the border, where I lived, what I was doing, etc. They laughed at religion and church ceremonies, they tried to impose the ideas [illegible], Marx's and Lenin's – the belief in the power of the hammer and sickle. They beat people during the investigations. At night in the cell or during the interrogations, I could hear the sounds of beating and the outcries of tortured victims, *sliedowatiels'* shouting, women and children crying. Every day, sticking close to the hole in the door which we had made especially for that purpose, we saw men walking by to the toilet with their heads bandaged. We knew what it meant. The hole was a window to the mystery of torment, starvation, and humiliation – as we also saw those who walked out of the cells or stayed in the corridors to report something to the janitor.

We felt sorry looking at the eight-year-old children, girls and boys, so-called *bezprizorni*, with no parents nor any care, little vagabonds. The prison replaced school, home, and family warmth for them. Hearing loud conversations between the cells, whether we wanted to or not, we were getting to know the Soviet world and Soviet way of life, unknown to us before, and we started to understand the janitors and *sliedowatiels*, the majority of whom was recruited from among them.

The attitude of the prison authorities towards us was seemingly kind and promising, but most of us couldn't send a letter or contact their homes in any way. By the end of the year, we were ordered to write our families to get clothes, underwear and footwear. We received no answer to this, though. Once, by a three-day hunger strike, we made the warden visit us. However, when we requested to remove two nutty women from our cell, who had been driving us mad with their behavior, he responded with adding even more prisoners the following day. All requests were actually counterproductive.

I was called for interrogation 16 times, and the sentence was read out to me by some older unassisted judge. What I understood from it was that I was sentenced in absentia to eight years of *isprawitielno-trudowe lagery* in Karaganda, Kazakhstan. We were put together for a transport in a separate cell, and deported in March 1941.

b) The labor camp – it wasn't easy to get there. The journey took four weeks. The cattle wagons, so-called *tiepłuszki*, were furnished with bunk beds, whose boards were covered with more than a dozen-centimeter layer of ice, which melted only thanks to the warmth of our bodies. There was an iron stove in the middle, and we received coal from time to

time, [illegible], bread, water, rarely – soup. There was a roll call twice a day. Hunger, smell, freezing cold, constant arguments often leading to fights – that is the picture of a one-month journey to Karabas. Three days after we set off, they stopped to have us bathed and disinfected. The bath with hot water was such a treat that even the men-only service didn't cause any protests from us. On our way back, we walked past prisoners squatting in the snow in front of the train, waiting for hours for their turn, which – by the way – we had had to go through as well. Karabas was a tiny station in the steppes, with camps scattered close around it, surrounded with two rings of barbed wire, "pigeon holes" for the guards, half-demolished barracks for the prisoners and a couple more solid houses for the *naczelstwo*. And there we go again. Bunk beds were infested with bedbugs in such amounts that if you hit the ceiling with your leg, hordes of them fell off. Meals twice a day, from dirty bowls. More waiting. No labor nor anything of interest, just blunt thoughtlessness and apathy. Only the meals or the fights to get a better sleeping spot invigorated us. We were mixed up with the Russians, who began to steal and trade illegally, extorting everything they could from us by all means, just to be able to get dressed up in a Polish coat, scarf or hat. A couple of weeks later, I was called to leave. After heavy trouble with the marching, which I mentioned at the beginning, I finally made it to Prystorna. We were walking together with men. Oddly, at every stop, one of the people started to pull in an audience and told fairy tales, crime stories or own experiences, emphasizing the communist propaganda themes.

In Prystorna we were assigned to a small, dark and dirty barrack, with no beds or bunks. I picked up some fresh grass in the fields, so that we wouldn't have to lie directly on the wet ground, and made our beds. There were a few rows of women in ragged clothes lying next to me. They were called *monaszki*, because for the last two or three years they had refused work and just prayed. A *brygadir* came every morning, checked who was ready for work and hustled them to breakfast (half a liter of soup). We couldn't complain about a lack of variety – we dug snow, cleaned an unbelievably dirty courtyard, buried dead corpses in the cemetery, because the spring sun had uncovered them from the snow, we fixed bridges, collapsed huts, etc. All jobs were too heavy for our weakened bodies and lack of skills. I started to [illegible] the almighty "norm", which you had to fill at all costs, to be able to demand 800 or 900 grams of bread or soup for breakfast or dinner at least once. Those who didn't attain the norm received only 700 or 500 grams of bread, and those who refused to work only got 300 grams of bread and soup once a day. The Stakhanovites and

tractor drivers received 1,200 grams of bread, food from the third cauldron and a possibility to buy something at "Tark".

As soon as the steppes got green, I was sent to a sheep farm (I cannot recall the name). I shared the living quarters with men. We didn't get any food at all for the first days. One of our "companions" incited everybody to rebel and not to go [illegible]. I didn't smell a rat, and I had to be solidary, as I was alone among them. Finally, the hunger forced us to leave for work. We were handed heavy hoes, which we had to use to rip the bushes growing in the steppe. They were tall as a person, very hard and fibrous, something like an acacia back home. The daily quota was five cubic meters per person. I was also chopping the *karagannik* for 10 days, until my fingers popped out of their joints, and I swelled like a balloon. Then I was assigned to sheep farming. I was grazing the mothers along with their kin, I helped the *czabans* in pasturing huge flocks, and I was picking and drying *kiziak* (sheep manure). I patched the stables, watched the flocks at night, sheared them, and washed them, but I never learned how to milk them. I spent two weeks on haymaking, where from dawn till complete darkness I raked and collected hay. If it hadn't been for the fact that I was hungry and exhausted, that I sensed *stupajka* [police men] at every step ready to throw the whole repertoire of names known to me from prison, that I was surrounded by a bunch of thieves and thugs of the worst kind, I would rule that period as the best during my whole stay in the USSR. There were only two Poles with me.

A month before letting me free, they called me back to Prystorna to the so-called *konwojka*, for no reason. It was a pretty big building with many dark corners, a small courtyard and a shared toilet, surrounded by barbed wire, watched by *strelkas* and dogs. I met many Poles there and the worst Russian scum – *bezprizorni* teenagers, involved in thievery, pimping, prostitution, and fencing. Nobody was sure of their property nor even life. With amazing dexterity, they pulled everything they wanted from under a sleeping person's body and moved it behind wires or hid it in [illegible] holes or toilets. Even though I didn't have much, I was robbed five times (shoes, stockings, soap, toothbrush, skirt, blanket and a scarf, which surfaced later).

The room meant for women was taken by the young criminals aged from 16 to 25 years, making the so-called *szalman*. None of us had the courage to spend a night there, we slept under the stars, or by the walls, men and women, no difference. Almost every night, shrieks

and swearing of the girls being beaten, kicked and pulled by hair by the *strelkas* or *naczelnik* who supervised the barracks, would wake us up.

Under an escort of an armed guard, we walked out to the fields to work, for example with the manure, pickling the cattle forage etc., then we returned for food and rest. I lost the sense of humanity and reality. It seemed as if I were dreaming a terrible nightmare, which would never end. No news, no hope. Finally, I was released, and a few days later they announced the amnesty. Having deposited the borrowed items, we were dropped in Karabas as free Polish citizens.

The attitude of the Soviet authorities after the amnesty changed a little for the better, but the Soviet prisoners, who had been showing us a lot of compassion and kindness until then, started to act almost hostile. [After] three days of waiting in the wet dens of Karabas, exchange of shoes and stockings, receiving documents, food, and over a hundred rubles for the way, we were finally free.

c) I picked Turkestan by blind chance. Several dozen people from Karabas went in that direction. The trains were overcrowded, nobody escorted us and nobody helped to find space for us. I suffered a lot because of that during the whole journey to the South. Soviet civilians were usually staying away from us, just watching us with interest and kept warning us against the thieves. I learned they were right in Aktyubinsk, where my self-made wallet with the money and the *udostowierienije* was pulled out of my pocket. The thieves were especially keen on the latter, as they sold them for a lot of money. A couple of forced transfers for *kompostirovka* (stamping the tickets) allowed me to look at the train traffic in the USSR: thousands of people with children and luggage hiding in the stations' garden-plots; endless lines standing in front of the ticket windows for several or more than a dozen hours to finally hear that the tickets for their itinerary would be sold elsewhere. Shouts, hustle, rush – the whole crowd runs to another ticket office and waits for hours again. Fainted people are being carried out from the lines. Trains set off with empty wagons for unknown reasons. Waiting spaces at the stations are clean and empty, unavailable to the crowds, open only to the privileged. A certificate from *san-obrahotka* is needed to pass. Whoever has the money can buy it for a couple of rubles, others wait for their turn for whole days in the bathroom or the bathing wagon. You can't buy food anywhere. People line up a dozen hours before the shops selling bread open, and it's still not certain whether there'll be enough for everybody. I made it to Turkestan, a district town in the South Kazakhstan, on an empty stomach. I got off with

others and we settled in the garden plot again, with no idea what to do next. Fortunately, the local NKVD got involved, brought us into the town and lodged us in the local inn. Following the old habit, we lied down for a couple of days until an agent from Kanchuk sovkhos came and took us with him. The ones leaving were usually peasants or not very intelligent women. Due to a lack of money, I had to go with them. I sent an application to the Polish army via the *wojenkomat* and set off to stray. We arrived in Burgiem, a Kazakh settlement by a natural rubber plantation. There was a school, *naczelstwo*, and more than a dozen new houses for workers and old huts of the locals. *Naczelnik* of the Soviet *choziajstwo* and an agronomist were Russians, the rest – Kazakhs. They wrote down our personal data, and we were assigned to work with [illegible] of the natural rubber right away. It consisted of softening the ground and cutting out the unneeded plants. The quota was so high that initially nobody filled even half of it. Later, by doing the work less precisely, we were able to pull it off, but it all depended on the *brygadir* who evaluated the work. Anyway, our earnings depended on the work, and being able to sustain ourselves depended on the earnings. Nobody was thinking about us now, we had to rely on ourselves. Rations in *stołowojs*: soup two times a day, 10–30 kopecks per portion. Bread in “Tark” sold in 800 or 600 grams portions, sometimes soap or sugar were sold in minimal amounts. After the [work at the] natural rubber plantation finished, Poles, being honest workers, moved to the gardens to collect tomatoes and root crops. Leftovers of melons and watermelons, which we were mercifully allowed to take, as well as baked potatoes, beets, tomatoes and cucumbers were such a treat, that even though the work was very hard and there were no breaks (we worked all Sundays for *Krasnaya Armiya*), we could live. After working in the garden, I also got involved in collecting natural rubber seeds – light, well paid work, I even made it above the norm (1 kg). This blissful time lasted until the first rains (the end of October). Working in the fields was finished. We tried to dig the rubber, but it was cold and wet, and after two days they gave us a break. Men went to *domostrojkas*, where you could earn quite well, the women sat at home and spent their last pennies on food. We went to cut the wormwood to “tapka”, but the norm was so high that we would only earn several dozens of kopecks. Our clothes and shoes were absolutely worn out anyway, and there was not even a place to buy rags for patches and footwraps. As if we didn’t have enough problems, 150 Poles arrived in Burgiem at this time, usually men looking to join the military, and more than a dozen Polish and Jewish families. After they had strayed for several weeks, NKVD directed them to our sovkhos. The exiles bought out or bartered all the private supplies from the local people, while the sovkhos supplies were

divided between all of us. Some didn't want to, and some couldn't work. The men who were setting off to join the army had left everything of value to their families and traveled like beggars, with no shoes, shirts or clothing. The Kazakhs were allotted better housing, while our people were given dirty and empty huts. A period of hunger and illnesses began. We heard something about tour delegation at that time, and even the delegate himself arrived, bringing six pairs of socks, pajamas, one sweater, one sleeping robe, and a couple of shirts for over one hundred and fifty people. It didn't cure people from colds. People were lying in dirt and misery on stolen hay, in pigsties, going through various inflammations, quinsies, malaria, without any medical care or assistance from the authorities. It wasn't until typhoid fever started to spread that a nurse was brought and they began to take the ill to the hospital. Soon it got overcrowded, so *naczałstwo* made one of the huts in the village an isolation room for the sick. Three women appointed by the delegate decided to take care of them, and all three fell ill with typhoid. One of them (Lt. Burszłyn's wife) died, leaving two of her children to God's will. Judge Stafiński and engineer Zbonikowski died too, but I wasn't there any more at the time, as I had left for the army soon before.

I couldn't find a job. I tried to get into the school as a language [illegible] teacher, but an exiled Russian Jew was faster. I tried to make gloves and socks from wool for the Kazakhs, but it didn't bring much money and soon ended. In December I got ill with jaundice and spent two weeks in the infirmary. I was handled well. I returned home weak and totally depressed, with no money at all and no perspectives for the future. Not having any other option, I accepted to work as a servant for a peasant, who earned enough to pay for bread and soup for me, and in exchange I washed and patched up his dirty rags, and killed lice in numbers which I never witnessed before or after that. I was at the bottom of misery and faithlessness. It seemed to me there was no rescue for us.

But the rescue for me came. At the beginning of January, tractor driver courses started, and I was accepted. The lectures were held in the Kazakh language but their level was so basic that I understood everything without knowing the language, and passed the exam with *otliczno*. Most importantly, I was now considered a working person and I was paid several dozens of rubles right away, which I could afford living for. It turned out to be trouble later, as the sovkhos chief didn't want to allow me to go to the army, saying that I was too much of an investment for the Soviet state to let me go and that I would have to earn it first, but when he saw a dispatch from Jangijul headquarters calling me to report in, he ceased to oppose.

The period of freedom was the hardest for me to survive. In the prisons and labor camps, I was a part of those deprived of their freedoms and rights, I was one of the people who were isolated from regular civilians. Half a year of living in freedom shed a lot of light on the Soviet society and the relations within. Exploitation, force, and violence prevail everywhere. There is no honest work, everything is done *pro forma*. The plan and norms are the nightmare of the foremen and the working people. All means to achieve the goal are allowed. There is no respect for labor or for state or private property. I saw new plows and machine parts abandoned in the fields for the whole winter, tractors standing in the rain without any protection, valuable natural rubber, dug out by us, scattered around in the fields (due to an unfilled quota).

The Kazakhs hate the Soviet system. Each of them dreams of the flocks of sheep and camels, carpets, full chests and full stomachs, the way it used to be. National awareness [is] very high. The news of German successes were taken gladly. They only asked whether the Germans respected property rights and how soon they could arrive. Extra work for *Krasnaya Armiya* was boycotted and people were looking at us cross-eyed when we did it, but being combatants, we had to comply. Any kind of thievery is severely punished, but at the same time people steal on every level of the social ladder. Protection and bribery usually decide about the positions. Wide masses are usually characterized by lack of initiative or creative thought, passiveness, fatalism, and ostensible – or real – acceptance of their fate. Life in freedom is a worse kind of labor camp, closely watched by the almighty fist of the NKVD.

Official stamp, 14 March 1943