

JAN GOLONKA

1. Personal data (name, surname, rank, age, occupation, and marital status):

Corporal Jan Golonka, 45 years old, clerk at the Polish Spirits Monopoly in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, Łódź Voivodeship, single.

2. Date and circumstances of the arrest:

I was arrested by the Soviets on 29 September 1939, a few kilometers from the Minkowice railroad station (between Rejowiec and Lublin) with the rest of the 6th Light Artillery Regiment. We were escorted on foot 60 km to Chełm Lubelski, where the entire transport of prisoners of war was loaded onto a train and taken via Zamość, Włodzimierz Wołyński, Kowel and Równe to Shepetivka, and then on to Sarny. There, officers, officer cadets, career non-commissioned officers and policemen were separated from the rest. The rest were told they would be sent back home. We were asked if we had received enough food and pay, because our officers had escaped to Romania. The Soviets distributed communist leaflets and newspapers. Then after two days, we were again loaded onto a train and transferred to Brody.

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

After we had bathed and shaved we were taken to Olesko, Złoczów district, where we (about 1,500 people) were accommodated in the old castle of Count [illegible]. Initially, the conditions there were horrible – only part of the castle was habitable (the rest was being renovated), but after a few days work began on building bunk beds and distributing straw, and then they provided straw mattresses, opened an infirmary and built a kitchen, etc. Registration began, and we were told that we would be working on the construction of the Kiev–Lwów highway. We were split into units and [illegible], and prisoners who spoke Russian were appointed commanders. The Germans were separated from the rest, and around the middle of December 1939 they were sent back to Germany. [Illegible] we were promised we would also return home then, and following negotiations with the Germans, we were solemnly assured of it, but it depended on the progress of the works. The promises were of course not kept. The work was hard, temperatures fell well below zero (winter 1939/1940), we had no warm clothes. That caused some people to attempt to escape while at work or

on the way to the work site. During an escape attempt during our return to the camp on 21 December 1939, two prisoners were shot dead, one was injured, and one managed to escape. After the second escape attempt by several prisoners at night, all of them were caught, they were all stripped of their clothes and placed in a punishment cell in only their underwear; then they were taken away – we never found out where to.

Rudnev, the head of the camp, was quite humane. He granted the sick and poorly-dressed people leave from work, but when he was absent (he usually arrived after we had left for work), the NKVD officers mercilessly chased everyone out. In spring 1940, a dozen or so prisoners of war (mostly Belarusians and Ukrainians) were selected and sent to Równe for training – later on they became guards at another camp. At that time, the conditions inside the camp improved markedly, because several hundred of our companions were transferred to a new camp situated 10 km away, in Angielówka, where barracks had been built. In the new camp, those most in need received boots, clothes and underwear, and a good bathhouse was built there, etc. This was all thanks to Rudnev, who was soon succeeded by another man called [illegible]. He did not implement anything new in the camp, and was usually drunk. In October 1940, a hundred other prisoners and I were transferred to a different camp, to Babino, 22 km west from Równe. We worked there for only two weeks, and on 21 December I was sent along with a party of 160 other people to the Susk [?] forestry management near Klewań, to fell trees. The working conditions were tough, we worked in knee-deep snow, and most of us were inexperienced in such work – so accidents happened. In my group, Fidelus, a worker in a slaughterhouse in Łódź, suffered an accident when he got entangled in bushes and didn't manage to jump away in time from a falling oak. No medical help was provided – he remained lying in the frost for a few hours following the accident before he was taken to hospital. In mid February 1941 I suffered frostbite to the toes on both feet (we were working every day, even when it was more than 30 degrees below zero outside), and seven other prisoners and I were sent back to the camp in Równe. Medical assistance was provided in the Równe camp – compared to the camp in [illegible] (where a paramedic was brought in only after there had been several accidents) it was much better, but during my stay [illegible] about 10 prisoners died of tuberculosis in March 1941. They were mostly sick people brought to Równe from other camps. At the end of April 1941 we were sent with a transport of about 400 people to Skniłów near Lwów, where we were to build a military airport. I was there when the German-Soviet war broke out. On 22 June 1941, I was working the night shift when the Germans dropped bombs on the airport under construction,

at 4.00 a.m. Two men were injured, one man called [illegible] from Wieluń died during the retreat (on his way to [illegible]). On 23 June, the entire camp was wrapped up and we went by foot, in a group of about two thousand people, via Złoczów, Tarnopol, Podwołoczyska, Winnica, Skvyra and Bila Tserkva to Kaniv on the Dnieper River, where we crossed the Dnieper in groups of 50 people by a railroad bridge, and we reached Zolotonosha on 17 July. That march, that took from 23 June to 17 July 1941, was one terrible, torturous ordeal. We walked 40–50 km per day, and there were days when we did not get any food or even a drop of water – we were lucky if we managed to drink a bit of smelly water from some puddle on the way. When people sometimes wanted to give us something on the way, the NKVD escorts would not allow it, saying “they shot at our people, and you’re giving them water!” and explained to those gathered that we were German. More prisoners joined us on the way, so the transport was constantly growing. Those who were unable to walk were beaten with rifle butts, and those who collapsed and fainted were lost. That was how over 200 people from our transport disappeared without a trace. During the march we were bombed several times by German bombers – for the first time as soon as we passed Winniki near Lwów, and then near Płoskirów, Winnica, and near Skvyra, where 18 people died as a result of the bombing and over a hundred were injured, mostly from the camp in Brody. On 17 July 1941 we were loaded onto a train in Zolotonosha, and taken to a place a few stations beyond Poltava, where we were unloaded at a small station and taken to a young forest. We spent five days there, out in the open air the whole time. On 26 July we were again loaded onto a train and taken to the prisoner-of-war camp in Starobilsk in the Donetsk Region, where we arrived on 28 July and where I was when the Soviet-Polish agreement was signed, on 30 July 1941.

4. Description of the camp, prison:

We lived in buildings of various kinds in the camps. In the camp in Olesko, we lived in an old brick castle, in Susk and Babin – in tents, in Równe – in an old brick mill, in Skniłów – in barracks. All the buildings were cramped, hygiene was bad, there was no [illegible]. There were bathhouses and disinfection chambers in all the camps.

5. Social composition of prisoners, POWs, deportees:

My companions were mostly prisoners of war imprisoned in September 1939, from the areas occupied by the Germans. Only in the Równe camp was there also a small number

of former Polish soldiers who had been arrested in their homes in 1940 and 1941 by the Soviet authorities. Most people were of Polish nationality, there were small numbers of Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Jews. Most of the Belarusians and Ukrainians worked as “unescorted”, and were allowed to leave the camp with special passes. But the Soviet authorities also divided the Belarusians into two categories: those who were trustworthy, and those who were not. Almost everyone was told that they should already be home and that they shouldn’t have listened to the Polish military authorities, but rather should have left their troops as soon as the fighting started. The morale was generally good, but it was noticeable that some people were disheartened, especially shortly after they had been imprisoned and in summer 1940, following the fall of France. There were also cases when prisoners informed the Soviet authorities of what other camp-mates did or said, etc. There were also numerous cases, especially at the end of 1940, of Poles trying to pass as Germans, hoping that they would thereby return home sooner.

6. Life in the camp, prison:

Life in the camp was difficult – no contact with families, hard work, poor food, miserable clothes, low pay for the job, high quotas that were difficult to meet – that all had an impact on the prisoners’ morale. We left for work early and returned late, and often worked for months without a day’s rest. In many camps there were common rooms with newspapers and books – obviously the content was communist, and apart from that [illegible].

7. Attitude of the NKVD towards Poles:

All prisoners in every camp were carefully registered and photographed – additionally in October 1940, the NKVD thoroughly investigated prisoners’ entire lives (from birth to the current day), their family, property, etc. People were not tortured during interrogations in the camps I was in. In every camp there was a so-called political commissioner who held frequent talks in the communist spirit.

8. Medical assistance, hospitals, mortality:

In almost every camp there was an infirmary managed by a doctor who was also a prisoner of war – except for the camp in Susk.

9. Was it possible to keep in touch with the home country and your family?

From January to September 1940, prisoners of war received letters from their families, later [illegible] contact with the home country.

10. When were you released and how did you join the army?

I was released from the prisoner-of-war camp in Starobilsk on 4 September 1941, I joined the Polish Army on that day and left with a transport to Totskoye.