THE ESCAPE

The news about the amnesty reached us in the spring of 1942. The first family who left the kolchoz was Krystyna and her mother. They were the same family who shared the hut with us. Krystyna, at age 17, was a beautiful girl with whom I had fallen in love. When she left, I was miserable and heartbroken, worried that I might not see her again. This emotional state of mind compelled me to do something about it. I suspected that probably I would find her near *Alma-Ata*, where the units of the Polish Army were stationed. So I decided to join the ranks of young soldiers.

Making myself appear two years older, and adding three more names of my colleagues to the list, I sent the application to the Polish recruiting centre in Alma-Ata. A reply came with instructions for me and my friends to report in, but first we were to pick up train tickets and passes from the N.K.V.D. at Pawlodar.

With tears in my eyes, I said farewell to my mother and sister. I never saw my mother again. It would be another 32 years before I would be reunited with my sister.

Our group of four young men, Krawczych, Kokosinski, Wachlu and I had to make the 90 kilometre trip on foot. In Pawlodar, we received the required documentation to travel by train. At that time, you had to have permission to travel, as all the trains were packed with soldiers and Soviet officials. During one of the stops at the railway station, we met with some Polish men who were returning from Alma-Ata. Their news was not good. According to their information, all the Polish forces left the country, probably to Persia and Iraq. This was unexpected and quite a shock to us. I was in a quandary about how to act. My friends wanted to return back to their families, but being more self-possessed than the others, I managed to persuade them to change their minds. We decided to continue to stay on the train and travel south towards the Russia/Persia border. Since our tickets and passes were only valid to Alma-Ata, the rest of our journey was illegal and risky.

To avoid meeting conductors, we jumped off the train before it reached the station, and jumped back on again when it was already in motion as it left the station. We had to repeat this process each time the train was making a stop. Inside the train, we hid in the corridors, under the seats, or sat on the outside steps of the wagon.

We were filthy dirty, full of lice and starving. We stole, scrounged and picked anything from the ground that was edible. I recall one incident when Kokosinski found some mouldy bread by the railroad. He cut off the mould with his penknife (the benefits of penicillin was not discovered at this time) and hid the clean pieces under the seat. While he was gone to get hot water (kipiatok) from the station, we could not resist the temptation, and Krawczyk and I ate the crumbs. When Kokosinski returned, we pretended ignorance, but he still suspected us of wrongdoing.

To make amends for our behaviour, we decided to reward him with something else. At the next railway station, we saw old ladies (babushky) selling fruit along the platform. Krawczyk walked among the customers and "accidentally" upset a full basket of watermelons. The melons rolled in different directions, giving me enough time to pick up a couple and run away. One of the melons I gave to "Koko" and asked to forgive us for eating his bread.

We hopped on any train that was heading south. In *Tashkent*, we got on a freight train carrying oil and petrol, and in a short distance of travel, the train stopped. We found ourselves in a restricted area in the midst of an army arsenal. Almost immediately, we were spotted by two soldiers. With bayonets fixed, they marched us into the military police station. Apparently we were suspected of sabotage, which was a serious charge during the war. We had unanimously agreed at the outset that in the event of any trouble, I would do the talking as I was more self-possessed and spoke fluent Russian.

At the interrogation, I knew I had to come up with a believable story. I explained that we were separated from the group of recruits who were going to *Krasnovotsk* to join the Red Army. It happened in Tashkent where we had tea at the railway station, and unfortunately missed our train. So, in order to catch up and rejoin our comrades, we jumped on the first train going in the same direction, and we arrived here… *I wot my tu pryjechali*.

To our great relief, they bought my story, and even told us when the next train was available to continue our pursuit. We were very lucky – I am convinced that God was looking out for us. After a long journey full of adventure and adverse conditions, we reached *Ashkhabad*, the border town with Persia. There we found a place to stay in an empty barn near the town. Now the time had come to plan our border crossing. We observed that once a week, a large convoy of Soviet trucks went over the mountain

ridge towards Persia. Our plan was to separate and hide at the back of those trucks the night before their departure.

Meanwhile, something else had happened. Krawczyk and I went out to town in search of food, and we met with two Polish nuns who were in charge of an orphanage. They gladly took us in, as they had vacancies due to the sickness and death of children during their journey from the north. A month later, in September 1942, we were the last Poles that the Soviets allowed to leave their country.

The orphanage traveled further to India, but we remained in *Tehran* (Iran) in a refugee camp administered by the Red Cross. That first night in Tehran, I thanked God in my prayers for my salvation from that forsaken country ruled by the Communist regime, where justice and human rights did not exist. I was very happy and fortunate to be able to start a new life.

In this transit camp for refugees, we were well cared for. First we were de-loused, disinfected and then given new clothes. Best of all, there was no shortage of delicious food.

In October 1942, we were sent from Tehran to Palestine. There I attended the Cadet School, where I received my education and military training to become a future officer in the Polish Army. Eventually, I caught up with the girl of my dreams, Krystyna, in 1943. She was a student at the girls' college in Nazareth. We met at the theatre after the show, and after a brief conversation I knew that she was not interested in me at all. I did not bother to tell her that she was part of my motivation to leave Russia. It occurred to me that I was only chasing a dream; consequently, my romantic feelings toward her dwindled.

In the fall of 1947, when the Jews escalated their terrorist activities against the British, it was time to leave the Holy Land. But that's another story.