EXILE

During World War II, we used to live in the suburb of the town of *Luck*. I remember the preparations made at home in anticipation of the bombing attack and shortage of food. With the help of neighbours, trenches were dug in our large orchard and then covered for protection from falling shrapnel when anti-aircraft guns were active. After a couple of rainy days, those trenches were half full of water, and children had lots of fun navigating the watercourse in bathtubs.

In terms of food preparation, we stored as much as we could. Our garret was filled with flour and grain, and we kept vegetables in the root cellar.

We were alerted to every wave of German bombers by the town siren, but quite often, from my vantage point at the top of a cherry tree, I was able to spot them first. Usually, they were flying in a “V” formation, looking like little silver crosses against the backdrop of blue sky.

My father, Frank (Franciszek), was mustered along with the rest of the police precinct to reinforce an army brigade near the town of *Lublin*. While he was away, I had possession of the keys to the police buildings, and went inside with my colleague to investigate. To our surprise, there was no one around, and we could not resist the temptation when we discovered some handguns. We packed pistols and ammunition into sacks and loaded them on a trolley, bringing the loot safely home. There we preserved the guns in oil and placed them in a whiskey barrel, which we buried under an apple tree. In the event of any future combat, we would now be able to arm ourselves.

When the Polish Campaign ended, Poland was divided by Germany and Russia. Even though Poland had a non-aggression pact with Russia, the Russian Army marched into my homeland not in friendship, but in war. All the Polish soldiers who found themselves on the territory occupied by Russia became prisoners of war, and were not treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Over 242,000 soldiers were imprisoned or sent to labour camps. Combined with the civilian population, the number of Poles deported to Russia totaled more than 1,500,000.

The Russians had systematically drained from Poland all people who fell into two categories: high- and middle-class citizens. Those people, in the eyes of the Communist regime, were branded “capitalists” and were considered the enemy of the proletariat, the working class. By the strong arm of the N.K.V.D. (the Russian secret police), they were torn away from

their homes and sent to Soviet prisons and camps. Their arrests were followed by the forceful deportation of their families to the Siberian wilderness.

The arrest of the Polish troops began immediately after the Soviet Army marched into Poland. In the following months of occupation, more soldiers were arrested who tried to escape to countries which Poland was in friendship, such as Hungary or Bulgaria, in order to join and rebuild the Polish army in France under General Sikorski. The same route of escape took my cousin, Stefan Gatowski. He flew from Warsaw to Bulgaria, France, and England where in a rank of Major he served in the Royal Air Force (RAF). Later, after the war in 1948, I met my cousin for the first time in London at the residence of Mr. S. Mikolajczyk, Prime Minister of the Polish Government in Exile.

Another unfortunate people on the N.K.V.D. list for imprisonment were those who held any government position, such as: judges, mayors, priests, professors and members of the police force. For the Communist regime, these people were representing a threat in future rebellion against the occupation.

Upon my father's return, he immediately made arrangements to escape with the family to Hungary. Unfortunately, before our departure, he went to town to withdraw money from the bank. He wore civilian clothes, but nevertheless he was recognized by a communist sympathizer wearing a red band on his sleeve and armed with a rifle. My father was arrested on the street. Why? Because he was a policeman. All efforts, including a petition with over a thousand signatures demanding his release, had failed. The next day, the Russian Army occupied the town and my father was put in the local jail. I had written to the N.K.V.D. authorities and received a reply that my father was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment, and had been transferred to *Kiyev* in the Ukraine. Of course I knew this was not true. As we found out later, he was sent to prison in *Ostashkov* near *Kalina*. From this prison and two others in *Kozielsk* and *Starobielsk*, close to 15,000 Polish officers were murdered – shot in the back of the head and buried in common graves in the woods of *Katyn* near *Smolensk*.

The first mass evacuation of Polish families began in February, 1940, in the coldest winter we had in a decade. Many hundreds of people froze to death in those cattle wagons before they reached their final destination.

EXILE

We were expecting that sooner or later the Russians will come for us, but we were in a hopeless situation. It was impossible to do anything about it – except pray and hope to be missed. All that time, the best thing we could do was to prepare ourselves. Therefore, my mother either sold or gave away food from our extra supply, and did the same with the furniture and other possessions. I remember her saying, "I'd rather give our things away to our people in need than leave them to the Russians."

My responsibility was to gather all the valuables: jewelry, important documents, and father's medals and hide everything in a safe place.

On the 13th of April, 1940, after midnight, we were awakened by a loud knock on the door, and given 20 minutes to gather our things. We dressed ourselves according to the previously discussed plan, putting on as many layers of clothes as possible without restricting our ability to walk. Each one of us took a bundle of other belongings wrapped in a sheet.

The two Russian soldiers who "paid us the visit" informed us that we were going to be transferred to another town because our home was designated to a military family. We were escorted out of the house into the army lorry parked outside, and driven to the railway station in Luck.

At the station I saw a very long train composed of cattle wagons already waiting for us. At each entry to the wagons there were guards posted. We were pushed inside and scrambled for a place on cots. There were no provisions for food or water. A bucket placed in the middle of the wagon served as our only latrine. Since I was a very bashful boy I did not use that bucket, and consequently after three weeks I developed severe constipation.

The next day at dawn we felt a sudden jerk. The train began to move, and the tension and apprehensive mood was broken by children's cries and the lament of grown ups. Most of the time, the train chugged at a moderate speed. Sometimes it stopped for a day or two on the side line at the station. Not knowing our destination, I read the names of the stations with great interest, peering through the cracks in the wall. That information was passed on to the rest of the occupants in the wagon. Finally, after a journey of three weeks, the train made its final stop in *Pawlodar* in *Kazakhstan*. From there we were driven off in army trucks to the various collective farms (kolchoz).