

## THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES – LIFE MUST GO ON

After these two assaults, we decided to find somewhere else to live. With luck, we found a hut already occupied by three Polish families. In one room, there was enough space to share with a mother and her young daughter.

The hut was half dug in the ground. The walls were constructed with twigs, clay and straw. Each room had one small window, and a floor made of clay. Naturally, there was no electricity, plumbing or flush toilets. We fetched water from the river, and made our latrine behind the hill. At night, we had to be very watchful not to step on those “soft mines.”

The shack was badly infested with bedbugs. Routinely at night, we would light candles and with shoe in hand, we would smack these bloodthirsty pests. Quite often they would have already tasted our blood, so the walls were covered with red spots where they met their end. Whenever the nights were warm enough, we’d sleep on top of the roof to avoid the discomfort of more bedbug bites.

In Russia, they have an old proverb: “*Nie vabotayesh – nie knshayesh*” (If you do not work, you do not eat). To appease one’s hunger, it was imperative to have employment. In Russian communist regime, there was no welfare, social assistance or food banks. In the village where we lived, jobs were very scarce. Any jobs I was fortunate to get were in summer, and did not last long. My first work was in the quarry, where I crushed alabaster rocks into fine gravel with a heavy wooden mallet. This aggregate was further pulverized into powder in the mill. The powder was then used in the production of china dishes. For one month of hard work, I was rewarded with 10 kg of flour and 120 rubuls (approximately \$30).

During harvest time, I drove a wagon and team of two oxen, delivering grain from the field to be stored in the village warehouses. In this kind of job I was able to do some scrounging. At the end of the day I headed home with pockets full of grain.

During the whole period of my stay in the collective farm I had managed to obtain a few more brief jobs. I was a night watchman, overseeing a watermelon patch. I also worked as a shepherd, watching over a flock of sheep, and even spent time as a horseman during the roundup of wild horses for the Red Army.

By now it was the fall of 1940, and we were heading towards dreaded winter. When it finally arrived, it was severe, debilitating, and in many

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cases fatal. Due to malnutrition and lack of proper medicine to treat cholera and dysentery, many young children and old people did not survive. I had also contracted some unidentified disease at this time, possibly an infection. My body, mostly my legs, was covered with sores oozing white pus. I had all kinds of advice on how to cure it, including washing the sores with my own urine, or bathing in chicken manure. None of these remedies worked, so I invented my own ointment. I scraped the heads off matchsticks and mixed them in lard. The substance became a “miracle cream” for me. In three weeks, my sores were healed.