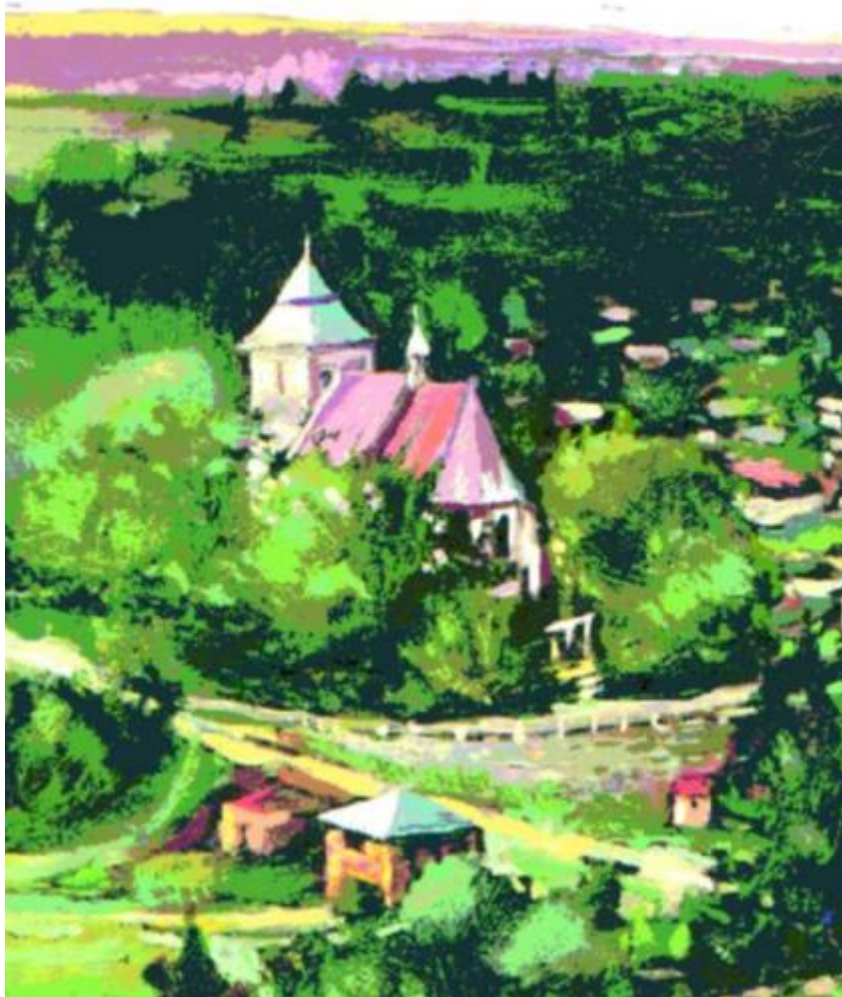


AUTOBIOGRAPHY

of

Stanislaw J. Kowalski



The small Polish town of Jazlowiec, where I was born at almost the same time as the big guns of World War One fired their last shells in Eastern Europe, never made it into the history books. At times its general regions were deeply engulfed in fighting through many violent centuries, but men of writing skills were never around to give a full and accurate account of every event and military conflict. Written episodes of the history of my hometown Jazlowiec were rare and

hard to find. The only real source was to look at the ruins of the great castle, once the mightiest in the region -- the palace of the last king of Poland, later converted to a convent. Other sources of local history included the town hall's scant records, the medieval churches of Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, and Armenian faiths, and the old synagogue that proudly stood on the top of the hill to dominate the homes of its faithful. There were many lesser relics of the past that made me seek history in every sight that came to my young and eager eyes, but the real truth was left for me to discover by reasoning and guesswork.

My carefree childhood, while subject to parental guidance, developed happily within these historical views, alongside my two younger brothers, Frank and Ted. I always considered these young years as the best of my life for quite a few reasons, but the most important of them was my close association with immediate family, relatives, and friends. Here, in the deep green valley, created by the dynamic forces of Nature for the benefit of all earthly creatures, I lived with people who had their minds set on peaceful and neighborly living within an ethnically diverse community.



There was a river a mile or so away, where I used to cool off from the summer heat. There were woods that covered the slopes of the valley and generously offered wild strawberries, raspberries, and sweet cherries to every youngster like me. There were also two streams passing through the center of the town that, with their flow, directed my steps to the convent where good nuns offered my friends and me fruit and sweet cookies whenever we entered the grounds of their holy place. In general, this was the playground of my early years, which for this very reason remained in my memory as a Shangri-La of joy, peace, and happiness.

There was also a six grade school on the uphill street just past my home where I got my first taste of knowledge. I was good at learning the subjects and, in recognition of my inborn skill, my teacher, Mrs. Selzer, recognized that I was capable of more education than the small school could offer. Such ideas stimulated my childish thoughts. Thanks to the wisdom of the elders I left my home and the green peaceful valley to follow the road laid out for me. I was ten

years old at the time. I was not totally happy at leaving this pleasant valley, but I accepted the necessity of stepping into the wide-open world for the improvement of my body and mind.

There was at least as much history in the county town of Buczacz as in Jazlowiec, where my next Alma Mater was located, and where I spent eight of my growing years acquiring knowledge and new experiences. Again, old ruins of the castle, ancient churches, the stylish synagogue, the rococo town hall, cobbled streets, and everything else I could lay my eyes on belonged to the distant and mysterious past. In every ancient artifact I read the deep history of victories and defeats, of progress and destruction, of peace and war that encompassed a mutual coexistence of three basic nationalities - Poles, Jews and Ruthenians, later called Ukrainians. These were productive years in my gathering of knowledge. At this time I acquired a solid background in the basic values that the future expected me

to apply
in solving
problems.



Eight
years of
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was a
long
stretch of
time
within
which
much

transpired, and not all of it was to my liking. Gaining knowledge was definitely the positive side but the contemporary world disappointed me in its preference of some lesser issues. From distant horizons came rumors of disturbing trends. At their onset I considered them to be too far removed from me to ever affect my life. Beyond the borders there was the Abyssinian war, the Civil War in Spain, Hitler's rising nationalism, and Stalin's blood-red communism. These dangers, like dark clouds in an unstable sky, kept building into a great dark threat to the peace of the world. Still, they appeared to be too distant to ever reach the places where my body and mind sought to develop into full maturity. I ignored the growing clouds, preferring instead to deal with my friends, colleagues, and teachers, in whom I saw the more noble side of humanity. I felt gratified with wisdom and guidelines that were set by the school and community for our benefit. As I look back at those years, I see them as the times of small adventures, little

glories, and occasional downfalls. At the end of my stay in the school two significant personal events took place.



In Jazlowiec, Poland 1938

One of them was an excursion to the city of Lwow where, as a member of the school's volleyball team, I participated in the district competition. I had seen the city before, but this time being almost unsupervised I got a taste of it all on my own. That gave me the feeling that I could easily manage life in its walls as the future student of a well-known university. The other event, definitely greater in my appraisal of values, was my matriculation exam. I did quite well in four written tests and that left me with only one oral examination to take. It happened to be history - my favorite subject. Half an hour after entering the examination room I walked out from the building with the statement of the faculty commission that I had reached the age of full maturity. It was a big day for me, although the actual celebration and rewards were yet to come.

My most appreciated reward was a long vacation, a trip to the city in northern Poland and a brand new bike, which few young men owned in my hometown at the time. There was another side of my maturity that was soon recognized by other people. This was the military service to which I was obliged before I could venture any further into the academic world. And so, at the beginning of October 1938, I journeyed by train to a facility to be trained in the art of war, thinking it merely another step in my education.

The town in which the military school was located was also rich in history; it bore the name of Tarnopol. This time I lived within the thick stone walls of an old castle where I was to stay for the duration of the training. In my later assessment of its value the acquisition of military knowledge was an important step forward in enlarging my horizon of thinking that in my immediate

future proved to be useful to me in a number of ways.

Life was hard in the officer's school. Early rising, plenty of exercise and lots of discipline were the daily fare. At the time I was not very fond of such living. However, in later years I came to see the sense and wisdom in the hardships they imposed on me. Within that year I developed physically into a fully mature man, capable of defying physical and mental adversities that were waiting to challenge me. I hated the long tiresome marches, or scaling mountain slopes, or keeping guard duties, or pretending war, which seemed to have no specific part in my future plans. I yearned for the school in Lwow and that was all I really saw ahead of me.

Things did not go quite as I expected. The University remained forever an unfulfilled dream. As soon as I completed military school history called me to be an active participant.

I was assigned to military service at one of the infantry regiments in the southeastern frontier of Poland. Near the end of my term, in September 1939, German tanks suddenly crossed the western borders. An order of the unit's commander assigned me, as the newly promoted cadet officer, to the reserve battalion where I was to wait for my posting to the front line. After a week or so of fighting it became apparent that the war was not going well for our side. The fighting at that point did not affect me to a great extent - only a few German air raids and plenty of marching from one place to another. But in the end the actual front came unexpectedly from the opposite direction. At some point, while marching south to some makeshift defense positions, my unit was confronted by Soviet tanks that had crossed the Polish eastern border without warning earlier that day.

Ill prepared and caught by surprise, the fighting was brief as we were cut off and surrounded by the superior Soviet forces. I was taken prisoner, which from the very beginning was an unacceptable alternative for a trained fighting man. Immediately I looked for a way out. As an initial precaution against any possible reprisal on account of my rank, I took my stripes off. I reasoned that it would be safer to be an ordinary soldier in the Soviet system that had brutally destroyed its own upper and middle class, including most of its own officers. It was only many years later that I learned about graves of Polish officers in Katyn and Miednoye and realized what a fortunate and rational decision my instincts had guided me to.

As a POW prisoner I was placed in a provisional camp in a building that until few days earlier has been functioning tobacco factory. Although detained in an area, surrounded with high fence and barbed wire on top of it, I did not give up on the idea of escaping from Soviet hands. The whole next day I looked around for a way out and by the end of the day I was ready. At one of the guarded corners I saw a passage leading to some unguarded factory grounds. On the other side of the fence there was an orchard with beautiful red apples shining to me from afar and a few white houses just behind.

My escape began at dusk. I slipped behind the back of a guard who was busy talking with some civilians across the fence, who, on noticing me, did their best to keep the guard's attention. I slowly opened the gate leading to the passage. From then on I had to act fast and without hesitation. As I reached the middle point between two lights my hand got hold of the top of the rail and my feet instantly started climbing. The shrill of the steel reinforced army boots, scraping against the fence, sounded like a hundred machine guns firing in my direction, but the clamor did not matter at this point. Speed was the only factor to be considered. In a fraction of a second I was over the top of the rail. I balanced my body for a moment and jumped. The barbed wire at the top stopped me from falling for a second as my jacket got entangled into its sharp points. I pulled myself down with the weight of my body as my jacket ripped. I landed with my feet and hands on the soft grass of the orchard and took off running blind.

A minute later I knocked at the door of a small house at the edge of the town. I badly needed some civilian clothing. The people inside obliged me and the man of the house even took me out of the town, and put me on the road to my hometown. Dressed in rags I walked two long days avoiding the Soviets and the local militia, which were now taking over police duties. It was a painful sight to see these invaders now masters of what was my part of Poland. My only consolation now being that I was still free.

Unbeknownst to me, my regained freedom was to be only a short lasting reprieve from the inevitable sentence of the Soviet Internal Security Department. At this point my personal freedom was all that mattered. With this in my mind I returned home greeted by crying parents and rejoicing brothers. For a few months the home of my early childhood became again my sweet home, safe and secure for the moment, but only in appearances.

Safety soon became a paramount problem. There were secret police keeping their eyes on young men, especially those educated and connected with the military, who were declared as enemies of the people by the new system. My family and I fell into this category on account of being prominent citizens of the

town.

In the early spring of 1940 my parents and my youngest brother, loaded onto a horse wagon, were taken to the nearest railway station to start a long journey to Siberia as deportees and forced agricultural labor in the vast territory of Khazakstan. I escaped their fate, because I slept that night in the house of a poor relative outside the town. I became a fugitive from law and two months later, when calling at the district office for documents to legalize myself as a person seeking employment, the Soviet police instantly put an end to my hopes of legal freedom. Thus began my prison odyssey.



That day was the beginning of a nearly two-year trek through the prison system in the land of "Gulag Archipelago" while carrying the appellation of slave laborer. Eight months in the crowded cell in Czortkow prison, three months in Starobielsk compound, the long trans-Siberian trip in a red railway boxcar to a transit camp in Buchta Nakhodka, near Vladivostock, and in the final phase of the journey a sea voyage in the cargo holds of the slave ship "Dhzurma" to the frozen land of Kolyma.

To the Russian people, Kolyma was a frightening name; to me it was totally unknown. While on the boat I learned of its gold mines and other mineral riches. This made me think that my prison conditions would improve considerably once I started digging precious metals for the Soviet state. Right from the time I left Buchta Nakhodka everything worked the wrong way for me. The cargo ship itself, carrying in her holds up to eight thousand prisoners, was hell on earth. Packed like sardines in five tiered bunks, our movements were limited to the space occupied by our bodies; stinking latrines, set in the corners, continuously

spread odor around; fresh air supplied by an opening to the hold was far below what humans needed to exist; and food rations, cut to the bare minimum of bread, sauerkraut, and a measure of water was merely another miserable torture. The elements of nature like the weather and the waves acted only to aggravate matters.

While in the middle of Japan Sea we met with a violent typhoon, which made the ship rock, swing, and sway like a little toy. Hammered by the fury of waves the vessel went up and down, rolled from one side to another, and when facing a gorge of water, would plunge into its depth as if in a suicidal attempt to bring an end to herself and her human cargo. We, the system's prisoners fared no better. Soon the sickly smell of vomit added its odor to the stench of the latrine spills, making a sickening mess of the entire hold's interior.

Sick like a dog I laid on the floor paying no attention to anything but, my nauseating sickness. Suddenly I heard a sound of cracking wood above me. I jumped to my feet to watch helplessly the flying debris falling down upon my friends and colleagues. Where the center bunk had stood, there was a huge heap of moving and listless bodies mixed with the pile of splintered lumber.

I hardly got to my feet when a sudden stream of people picked me up and carried towards the exit of the hold. Half naked I was pushed up the broken steps and thrown outside into the merciless hands of the raging storm. Instantly I went into a spin, doing a crazy dance like a man beat on all sides by the raging power of the sea. The blowing wind and waters rushing over the deck had no mercy on my fellow-prisoners and me. In between of nature's fury I saw some screaming men washed down to the edge of the ship and then disappear over the side in a flood of surging water. These were the fortunate ones – nature had spared them from a more painful and slow death in the terrible land of Kolyma.

I held on for life to hanging ropes not to follow these victims into the dark churning sea. While fighting surges of salty seawater, I was completely helpless against the fury of the cold wind. Its gusts blowing savagely made me shiver and tremble like a leaf subjected to a sudden blast of a squall. I cursed the whole ugly world around me to get the anguish out of my system. In one of the sporadic breaks of the nature's fury, I made my way towards the entrance of the hold. At a convenient moment, when the guards pushed others away, I jumped down to the slimy floor down under. Falling into the dirt, protected from the fury of the weather, I felt like I had reached the safety of heaven.

The center bunks already stood up. In semi-darkness I found my friend Ted, who came out intact and unscarred from the incident, and who as a good soul

took care of my personal belongings. He did even better - he reserved for me a tiny bit of space on the top layer of bunks right under the opening of the hold. I climbed as fast as I could to immediately take the possession of this priceless piece of ship's space for the remainder of the insane journey.

When I looked down from the height of my new nest, I instantly realized that from then on I was to travel in a relative luxury. My place was clean, cool, and always caressed with fresh air from the sea. Some luck must have turned my way. From then on I was to stay above the slimy floor, away from stinking latrines, and untouched by the dirty feet of my comrades that routinely trampled on other floor residents.

After eight days of journey we reached the "promised" land of Kolyma, where open space was limitless, the air was as clean as the mountain streams, and precious gold was waiting to be picked up in a picturesque valley. At first sight I was rather taken by the natural beauty of this sub-arctic piece of territory that was still pure and unspoiled by greedy human hands. The view of the bay, the tips of mountain peaks softly embraced with whiteness of eternal snow, and narrow streaks of glaciers stretching down to the outset of cascading streams, filled my eyes with the wonders of Kolyma. All of it created the illusion of an enchanted world put into a deep relaxing sleep.

But still, some spoilers of this beauty soon brought the tint of disappointment. The gray dirty barracks of a slave camp that hung on the slopes around the port's perimeter made me think realistically. Since then this and other penal institution became known to us newcomers as "lager." That image became the permanent picture with which I had to live with as long as I stayed in the land of gold, where riches hidden in the soil contrasted sharply with the misery of human life.

There was more to the name of Kolyma than its natural virgin scenery. In its green valleys there was precious gold dust for me and other slaves to dig, there was hard laboring in lumber deep in the taiga, there was bitter cold combined with frost and snow for me to bear, and there was the winter storm "purga" to blow me off the road on my way to work. On the grimmest side of it there was sickness and hunger to drive me to the brink of starvation and the constant fear of reaching the end of my young life. The land became known to me as Stalin's graveyard for undesirables, where they were to slowly perish as slave laborers. The land of the "white death" had already consumed millions of people and there were millions more yet to become victims of the sick logic of political persecution.

Originally, Kolyma was the home country of Yakuti, Eweni, Chuck chi, and Tungusi tribes, where they felt at home. For a white man, even hardy Russians, this was a forbidden place. It might have remained as such for years, were it not for the greedy state enterprise seeking gold for badly needed foreign currency. The prisoners had no choice. They had to obey their masters and by their will to bear with misery as long as their strength would endure. And while bearing the hard work, cold, and hunger they ridicule their life's irony with these words:

Kolyma, Kolyma - a wonderful planet;

Eleven months of winter and rest one long summer.

The first sight of misery appeared right before me as I stepped onto the land, where I was to experience, and perhaps to follow the fate of men who had already perished in the permafrost of the taiga. My eyes caught the sight of the bodies of the men who had lost their lives on board the ship. That little episode was sufficient testimony to the newly arrived men that there could be no escape from the wretchedness of life while they labored in these gold mines.

From the capitol city of the land, Magadan, with fifty other prisoners, I was taken on a long ride through the wilderness of the taiga and a range of mountains to the end of the line. The truck could go no farther. From then on only a tractor's trails provided a clue as to the direction we were to follow to reach our final destination. We marched the whole day through the marshy terrain without food to find at dusk the gold mine lost deep in the green taiga. The labor camp was hidden in the valley and separated from the rest of the world by two ranges of mountains with their peaks still dressed in snow.

The next day I learned the name of the place - it was known as the "Pioneer" gold mine. The sight of the camp was nothing new or unusual to me. I have seen quite a few of these structures along the road to my new destination: log barracks enclosed in a rectangle of barbed wire with watchtowers on the corners, and a gray mass of prisoners living, working, and hoping for a miracle to deliver them from bondage. Among them there I was, barely 20 years old, trying to hold on to life with greater hopes of survival than the rest of the inmates seemed to have.

At the time the Soviet Union was already at war with Nazi Germany. This made us, the Poles, allies on the same side of the world's struggle against the Nazis. Prior to my arrival at Kolyma a treaty had been signed between the Polish

and Soviet governments by the terms of which we, the Polish prisoners, were to be released from prisons and labor camps in the near future. Although, four of my compatriots and I landed in a distant gold mine, we lived in hope that our day of deliverance from slavery would come before we expired in this God-forsaken land.

Our problem was how to survive hardships of mining and living in subhuman conditions till the Soviet authorities make up their minds as to how and when to comply with the terms of the treaty. Though scheduled for release I was still a slave compelled to work at the gold face, to dig and to cart five cubic meters of clay to the gold washing arrangement, called "butara". For a group of undernourished and often sick men such a menial goal was almost an unattainable task. There were few men in the working teams that ever reached such a work tally. For their superhuman effort they received somewhat better ration. However, in most cases the strenuous labor resulted in premature and sudden death to the heroes of the slaving class. The only consolation to it was that death saved them from the dehumanizing status of a goner, which came to everybody who reached the end of his physical strength. These prison conditions caused a slow process of body deterioration ending with the man's demise.

I was one who was ill suited for hard labor. Whenever I saw the glitter of gold its shine quickly tarnished when I touched the dirt with the shovel, pick and wheelbarrow. It acquired a morose view when my stomach turned upside down with hunger, when pestilent flies invaded my swollen eyes, and when the shouts of guards forced me to do the job for which I was physically unfit and mentally unprepared.

My mates, strong Russian mates, soon recognized my shortcomings. They asked the guard to replace me with a stronger and healthier slave. To them, I was a spoiler that could jeopardize their food allocation. So I was given the job of moving rocks from under the butara where the gold was washed. It was an even harder job - a job that kills fast. Some of my superiors must have noticed my physical ineptness and took pity on me. By the decision of a female doctor I was declared unfit for work at the gold face. Consequently, the chief of the camp transferred me to a work group assigned to lighter duties. Whatever was meant a lighter job was an equally hard task for me. The "light" duty involved lumber jacking in the taiga. The daily quota to be produced by the team of three men amounted to fifteen cubic yards of logs - an impossible achievement for untarnished, hungry, and sick men. The job did not go well with me either. I could not produce enough to meet an output that would qualify me for full ration of food. As a result, most of the time I worked on a half empty stomach.

In the penal institution of the Soviets one seldom socializes with other prisoners unless a common bond existed between them at some earlier time. Making acquaintances, however, is the unavoidable process of life. I befriended two old timers, the remnants of an original group of 200 prisoners that had marched into the valley two years earlier to build the camp. They, as camp functionaries, managed to survive the cold winters. I knew of few other survivors who had served their sentences and by all rights should have been free to go home. Such rights did not apply in Kolyma. These men lived outside the camp with limited freedom; they were entitled to better rations and were paid with money for their work but could never leave the place.

Within the rhythm of prison life there was a special class of people who begged for sympathy. These men were called "goners". They had visibly decayed into dying creatures and lingered in the dark corners of the camp as if to hide their bodies from the inevitable end. Also, there was a cast of common criminals with whom everybody tried to be on good terms. They would kill a man for a pair of boots, a coat, a shirt, or even for such a small item as a protective mask against mosquitoes and smoke flies. Somehow this criminal element did not bother me during my stay in the camp.

Four months after my coming into the gold mine, when the first frost and snow arrived I was close to giving up all hope for survival. Then suddenly our long awaited redemption finally came to pass. Shortly before the heavy snows cut off the camp from the region's main thoroughfares, four of my companions and I were taken by tractor and then by truck to the port of Magadan. We started the journey in cold and snowy weather, and two days later we finished it in the warm and sunny capitol of Kolyma. In the main transit camp, we found some 500 Poles waiting sea transportation to take them into free world.

The prospects of leaving the shores of this bitter land before the fast moving winter was to come appeared rather slim. The waiting men were shipped in trickles - at which rate only a small number of us would depart for Vladivostok before the cold weather would set in for good. Contrary to many promises from Soviet officials we were not given the status of free men. Instead they used us as slave labor for different city works in Magadan, the only city of Kolyma. At the time it might have had no more than 200 houses and buildings for the administration of the system. In addition it had six labor camps, including one for women.

The cold arctic winter was breathing down our neck and we were becoming impatient. One day, when ordered to go to work, we refused to obey our guards. Such an act, in the eyes of camp functionaries and higher officials,

amounted to an open rebellion, or a mutiny unheard of in Stalin's empire. Some written or unwritten law provided the penalty of death for such an offense. For some reason the local laws did not apply this drastic measure to us. Yet, for this "terrible" crime against the state we paid dearly.

Few days later prison guards accompanied by barking dogs marched us to a hard labor camp, a penal facility just outside the town, called 10th OLP. There, we were placed on restricted rations - the lowest ever allocated to prisoners - and went back to a labor routine. Hard work, hunger, cold, and sickness were the basic theme of life during our stay in the camp. My stay in that hell lasted just over two months. It was a cruel, painful and bitter experience that kept me all the time on the thin line between life and death. Day after day gray ghosts, beleaguered by frigid cold and the snow storms of the "purga" moved out of the camp to shovel snow, dig frozen ground, and pile heaps of logs for the benefit of the privileged.

I saw our ranks dwindling every day. I witnessed the increase of empty space on the bunks, I saw my colleagues turning into human shadows to disappear like a mist in emptiness of the eternal cold. One day, when assigned to the task of clearing snow off the road leading to cemetery, I saw a diabolic picture of humans exposing themselves, ahead of time, to still living phantoms working in the blowing snow. It was the burial procession of two drivers, two horses and a sleigh loaded with naked corpses. The stiff frozen bodies in the deadly embrace all too graphically epitomized the system's brutality, which promised to eventually consume the rest of us as well.

By the end of the third month only 130 men of the original group of 500 still remained alive. By that time, suffering from scurvy and malnutrition, I was quickly decaying into a goner. My mute mind did not think of anything else but food. Eventually even such dreams did not matter - I was on my way out. However, something triggered my senses to revive and my body to stay alive for few days longer.

On the worst day of this deprivation another miracle happened to me. It was the coldest day I ever experienced in Kolyma. The temperature fell to 50 degrees Centigrade below zero. A group of us were taken out of the town to clear snow off the local railroad tracks. Being cold and hungry I escaped from the work detail to find some food and to warm up in a place protected from the cold. A guard on duty at the female camp caught my companion and me and delivered us into hands of their commander. Later that day my camp commander delivered to us a sentence of five days in the cooler. Five days to sleep on ice, to eat a piece of bread, and drink a cup of water a day was like a death sentence to someone in my

condition.

A guard brought the two of us to the guardroom from where we were to follow the path to the cooler. While left alone for a moment, I jumped through the door and disappeared into the darkness of the night, making my way back to my group. The poor fellow I left behind was never seen again. Later, while having the daily ration of seaweed soup I overheard a conversation that some Poles were scheduled for release. I checked the information with some men in my barracks. I learned from one of them that my name was on the list of Polish prisoners to be released. My act of disobedience passed by unnoticed or was disregarded by my masters.

The next morning about sixty of us walked out into the free world. About the same number joined us two weeks later, and that was all that survived the hard labor camp ordeal of 10th OLP in the city of Magadan.



A prisoner in the Soviet Union 1940 - 1942

give up the prey that by an accident of war strayed in its domain. It took the crew a whole day of drilling holes in the ice, filling them with dynamite, and blowing the charges, before the ship was let go. Sailing through the frozen Okhotsk and ice-free Japan Sea we made our way back to Vladivostok.

On that cold day, on the last ship that left Magadan that season we departed from the frozen shores of Kolyma. Even the departure, approved by the authorities, was not easily accomplished. The arctic ice held strongly to the ship, unwilling to

Some time later, well after the war was over, I learned of the count of Polish prisoners sent to Kolyma. According to that information, of ten to twelve thousand Poles sent to there only 583 of them survived. I happened to be one of the fortunate few. My young body and determination to live, combined with a little luck, had saved me from leaving my bones in the arctic permafrost.

From Vladivostok the only way to follow was to the west part of the Soviet Union, where I was informed that a unit of the Polish Army was being formed. Traveling to the end of the Trans-Siberian railway, I expected to find there a Polish center that would conscript me into military service.

In Stalin's time any journey in this country was an adventure. Mine, which took me one month to complete, was a series of small but trying hazards. At the time everything in the Soviet Union was done according to various plans that almost never worked. My journey was typical.

At every step some success or failure happened by accident, sheer luck, or the unexpected good will of the authorities. However, I doubt that I would have succeeded if I hadn't strongly believed that in the end I would reach my goal. In a country where nothing was certain or safe only man's strong will and rational judgment could guarantee his survival.

With small rations of food, issued at the outset of the journey, I and other Poles would not have lasted very long without replenishing our provisions at stations along the way. Our first such needful stop was at Chabarovsk, where the train left the station without warning, leaving some of the Poles behind. By sheer luck I got to Ulan-Ude on a short run train. In that part of East Siberia some local Soviet commander gave us a helping hand -- such altruism was unthinkable in a communist country but it happened. He provided us with two loaves of bread and secured passage on the train to Irkutsk. Staying inside the train, never getting out of it at any stop, I reached the destination. But there I got stuck again - no ticket, no food and no train.

Only by taking the risk of going back to prison did I manage to get out of there. I jumped into a waiting train through the rear door of a car behind the back of the train official. This was a breach of railway rules punishable by law. Luckily I was not caught. On this train I made it to my would-be final destination - Novosibirsk. There, I learned that enlistment into the Polish Army was temporarily suspended. One of my friends from Kolyma who reached the place earlier and became an official in the Polish delegation came to my rescue. He arranged a railway ticket to Barnaul, a place half way to my parents, whom I

expected to find as forced laborers in a communal Soviet farm. I got safely to that Khazakstan city with no major problems. Going further was a different story. Again, I found myself with no ticket, no food, and no train.

That called for taking another risk. I jumped onto the train about to leave the station. With help of a Russian man, a stowaway like me, I got to the inside of the car. At some point train controllers made a check of the passengers. Both of us were caught and detained. One of the controllers left in care of the chief conductor who was to hand me over to the police at the terminal station.

As I stayed with him in his compartment, we talked. When the man learned that I was a prisoner in Kolyma, the name that was frightening to him, he let me out at a small station where I bought a ticket to legitimize my journey. It worked. The next morning I reached the final station from which only a horse sleigh could take me over open and snow laden prairie of vast Kkazakstan.

To my great disappointment there was no horse sleigh going that way on that day. I did not feel like staying in the cold waiting room of the station until the next day or perhaps longer to get a ride deep into the frozen steppe. On learning that the communal farm in question was only one day's walk away, I decided to try my luck. I asked an old Khazak for direction. Seeing that I didn't understand his broken Russian he pointed at the telephone poles indicating that they would lead me to the place.

Like Dr. Zhivago I walked from one pole to another over the hardened snow, hoping to reach the farm before nightfall and before the steppe wolves would come into the open. About half way there a horse sleigh caught up with me and the friendly driver gave me a lift to a settlement few miles short of my destination. It was still daylight when I parted the man's company. It did not take me long to reach the village where I expected to find my parents safe and sound. By then it was completely dark outside.

The first person I met in the village was a young girl from my hometown, a deportee like my parents. She showed me the barrack where my parents lived. Here I was happily and tearfully reunited with my family, once separated by thousands of miles, in a strange place thousands of miles away from our home. That night there were many visitors to my parent's place, everybody asking for news about their sons, husbands, and fathers. I had little news to give and whatever I had did not sound promising or complete. Even the director of the farm came to see me.

To this Russian man I was a curiosity, being the only Kolyma survivor he had ever met or heard of. He allocated me the highest allowable ration of food. He also gracefully assured me of a job on his farm as soon as I recuperated from scurvy. In other circumstances I would have taken his offer as an act of grace. In a land where slavery was the common mode of life, I reasoned in more prosaic but realistic way. My swollen and rotting legs became a good excuse for delaying my acceptance of his offer. Anyway, this job never materialized.

My stay with my family was short lasting. Within a month I was officially recalled into the Polish Army, then forming in Uzbekistan, a Soviet republic at the foot of Caucasian Mountains. As sweet as the meeting was after such a long separation, it was hard to part from my family for a new unknown period of time. My normal life, once disrupted by the war, kept taking me away from what one would consider conformity to the rules of nature.

On the first leg of my journey I met with an incident that might have ended tragically for me and all my colleagues traveling the same route. Were it not for the driver's experience with local phenomena of weather and for the animal instinct of horses, we might have been stranded and frozen somewhere in the middle of the steppe. At some point of our journey the snow storm, called a "buran", caught us in the open steppe. To many, such weather condition meant a tragic end. People caught in it lose their sense of direction, walk aimlessly in snow, and in most cases freeze to death. Our drivers understood the situation and let the horses follow their own instinct. By some inherent gift the animals always bring their human masters home and relying on this we safely reached the railway station, where we boarded a train going south.

After three days journeying in a crammed wagon I reached the place where I expected to become once again a soldier of the Polish Army. Whatever I found there was not close to my expectations. Like everything else in the Soviet Union organized according to a "plan", the improvised military camp and improvised conditions barely provided for a soldier's subsistence.

The "tent" army that I found in the town of Lugowaya did not look like an army at all. The best I could describe was a huge hospital without nurses and doctors, which accommodated refugees from prisons and labor camps. Almost all of them were victims of starvation, almost all looking weak or being sick, and some even suffering from contagious typhoid. Among this army of semi-invalids there were very few healthy able-bodied soldiers capable of going to the front.

A man in charge assigned me to a waterlogged tent with some sick men laying on wet straw and few others whose task was to scoop water day and night from a specially dug ditch. The sick were eventually moved, either to the local overcrowded hospital or to the graveyard outside the town. It would not be an overstatement to say that life in this military camp was not much superior to the prison misery. Seeing this, I thought that for us there was no end to suffering even. However, there was one important difference - we had hope.

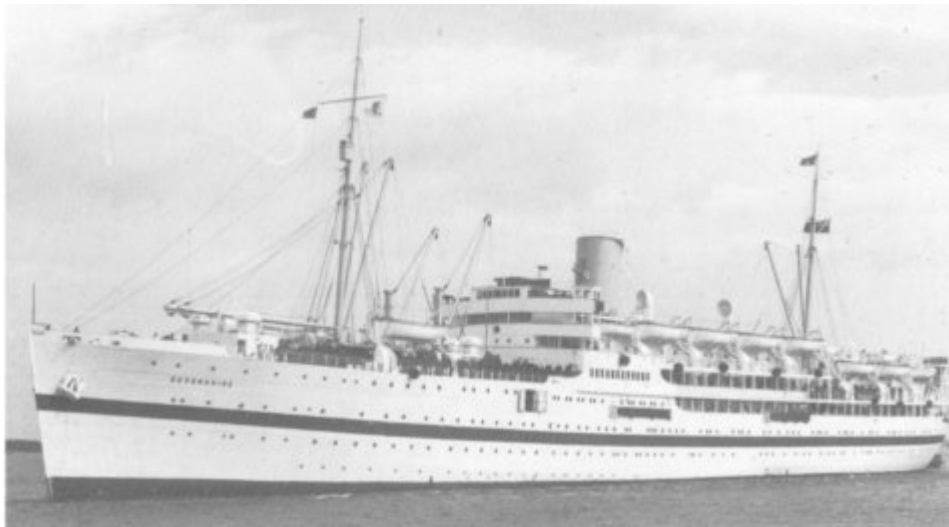
Then unexpectedly, about the end of March 1942, very big news reached the camp. The Polish Army in the Soviet Union was to be evacuated to the Middle East. It sounded too good to be true. For us latecomers to the civilized world the message proved to be true sooner than any of us expected. On April 1st that year we landed on the sandy beaches of Pahlevi, in Persia, not believing our eyes that we had left for good the country of slavery, hunger, sickness, and endless misery.

Persia, Iraq, Palestine, and Egypt were the countries where we finally found real freedom and where we managed to recuperate mentally and physically from wounds sustained in the Soviet Union. At the very beginning of my stay in the Holy Land I was sent to a British military hospital where after one month of treatment I was cured of scurvy. The only reminder of the ailment were big blue patches on my legs in places of healed sores. Then came a long leave, excursions to Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, and Egypt that was as much a recreational as an educational treat to me, and an eye opener to a new world.

In between the trips I got an assignment to a unit that was taking a rest in Palestine after its successful action at Tobruk, in Libya. No sooner had I got myself settled in the warm country, where cold, hunger, and disease were no longer my companion, than the whole Polish Army in the Middle East moved to the Iraqi oil fields to protect them against possible German penetration through Caucasus Mountains. This never happened but an easy life in hot climate on rich English ration had its merits to the men, who not so long ago experienced the frozen hardships of Soviet prison camps.

The stay in the desert with little or nothing to do amounted to an uneventful existence - perhaps too dull for young people, whose life became stagnant at the gate of a wide-open world. Feeling stranded in the middle of nowhere, I decided to join the Polish Air Force in England. The idea of being a pilot had always appealed to me. When the occasion arose I immediately volunteered for the task that seemed to impress many young high-spirited people. After passing the compulsive medical examination I joined a group of young and enthusiastic future flyers, who considered fighting as much an obligation as a personal adventure.

My latest choice of service brought me face to face with another adventure - a wartime sea voyage to far away England. My journey started in the Iraqi port of Basra, where the whole group of prospective pilots boarded the passenger liner "Devonshire" for a rather short journey to Karachi. This ship and the short sea

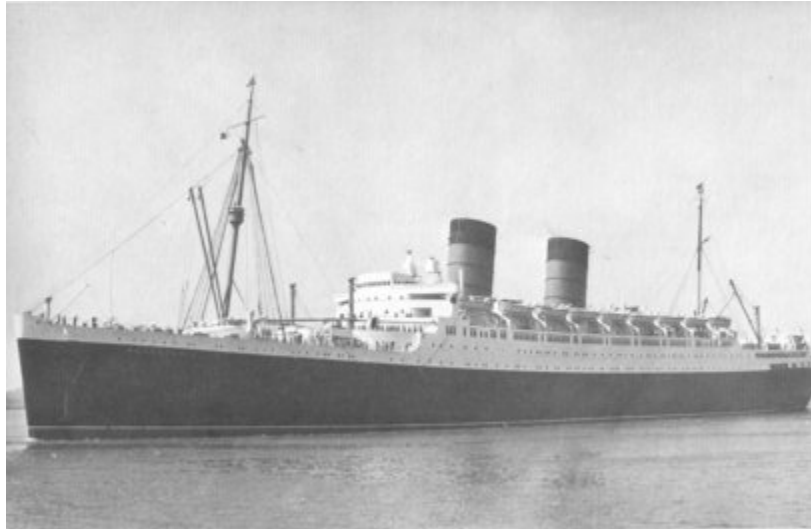


voyage were a great experience to me, a man who only a few months earlier had labored in hunger and arctic cold.

As I entered the inside of the ship I saw a world of unbelievable sights. There was luxury everywhere I looked - crystal lights and mirrors, the soft red carpet, and elegant furniture set in places with classic English taste. Somewhere at the mid point of a long corridor there was a cabin with two beds glowing with whiteness and cleanliness. Upstairs I found a gleaming restaurant, where tables with china and silver were ready to serve passengers for a meal, served by waiters. These were only a few of the comforts that I discovered and appreciated in course of this voyage.

The luxury liner dropped us off in Karachi, where British officials took good care of us common travelers. They treated us in accordance with the colonial tradition of European superiority. The short stay did not let me see much of the Orient's mystique and culture, but whatever I saw was new, exciting and overpowering. Another small ship took us to Bombay, where we boarded another luxury liner - this time the French "City of Paris". Again I found comforts of which a year ago I couldn't even dream. I liked being spoiled by kind of luxury that only the French could deliver. Clean cabins, delicious cuisine, and recreations on the upper deck that were an unbelievable treat.

This wartime pleasure cruise came to an end in the warm, green, and beautiful South African city of Durban. The local authorities accommodated us outside the



town in a picturesque place, set within lush suburban greenery, decorated here and there with red bungalow roofs. Comfortable quarters, an exciting town with long promenade along the beach, and friendly people aroused in me the feelings of a man that in a distant foreign place had met with dignified treatment by others. For me and other men who survived the Soviet "Gulag" it was wonderful medication that restored the faith in man that we had almost lost.

Hidden in some corner of the city there was also a pleasant surprise for us to discover. This unexpected wonder was a group of Polish women who, like us, were waiting for transportation to England. Among these ladies, two females, mother and daughter, were my acquaintances from the Soviet Union. In this warm and pleasant place we soon developed a close friendship. There were a few other friendships which developed in the Durban hotel, and which followed on board the ship that was to take us on the last leg of our long sea voyage.

The ship that eventually arrived to take us away from comforts of Durban was the trans-oceanic liner "Empress of Canada", converted into a troop carrier for the duration of the war. She was a big ship, quite impressive, and allegedly very fast. The last rating was supposed to be the greatest of her merits - it gave her an edge over enemy U-boats, waiting for their prey somewhere in the Atlantic

ocean. This time young cadet-officers, like me, had to give up some of our comforts in favor of our female Polish companions, who were given their ticket to England after long waiting. The loss of the cabins that we gave up to the ladies was fairly compensated by their female company during the voyage.

This big ship was crowded with military personnel of quite a few nationalities. Apart from Englishmen, returning from Burma, there were



Canadians, Poles, French, Greeks, and even Italian prisoners of war, being taken to England as farm laborers. Even the female gender was represented with more than one nationality. Among them the French and Polish were most visible.

On the thirteen day of the journey, which coincided with the date of 13th March, 1943, when the ship kept zigzagging through the waters of South Atlantic, near the Equator line, I saw a rat climbing a rope to the life boat. This instantly became a joke among us about rats being first to leave the sinking ship. The same night, close to midnight, the joke with the rat ceased to be

funny - the most feared maritime war incident became a reality.

As we were fast asleep a powerful explosion shook the hulk of the ship, throwing us out of our hammocks and other sleeping arrangements. Instantly the alarm signal went on and as it was beaming the light went gradually down. I jumped into my pants, shirt, and shoes and joined the silently moving crowd as it was making its way through the long corridor and staircase to the top deck. According to prior drills, held daily, each of the passengers had his place pre-assigned to one of the lifeboats, hanging down the port of the ship. As I stood in gray darkness on the deck, waiting for my turn, I saw some of them against the lighter darkness of the sky going down, loaded with survivors, and disappearing down below. When finally my turn came there were no boats left.

Standing by the ship's starboard I reasoned that this was likely to be my end. Suddenly, in the darkness, I heard the sound of a motorboat coming towards the ship. In the matter of seconds I slid down a rope into the water. Before I realized what was happening I felt myself being pulled by some hands into the boat. The boat was crowded but there was just enough place to accommodate an extra passenger. Once again the hand of fate favored my existence with a rescue.

The motorboat almost immediately left the danger zone and at top speed moved away towards safer waters. As my eyes glided over the dark sea I saw several people struggling to distance themselves from the ship by swimming away with white life jackets upon their shoulders. In the darkness I could barely see these white spots strewn all over the water like floating balls. We passed them by - the boat had no more room for them.

Soon another explosion filled the air with the sound of imminent death to those close to the listing ship. This was the torpedo that sent huge and beautiful "Empress of Canada" to the bottom of the ocean with a terrifying sound as waters rushed into her split open hull. As she was sinking, the sailors on my boat took off their hats and began, most strangely to me, singing a popular wartime song "Roll out the Barrel". I never learned the symbolic meaning of the tune and its lyrics, in spite of later questioning some of the British sailors.

When the morning came I gave up my seat on the boat to one of the Polish ladies, taking in exchange her place on a big square raft. It was the chivalrous thing to do in the circumstances although it really didn't matter to our survival.

For the next three days we floated on boats and rafts, moving up and down on the unruly waves of the South Atlantic. All the time our eyes stayed fixed on the horizon, hoping to catch sight of the coming rescue. In fact, we were sure that help would come because on the next afternoon a British plane flew over us signaling down to survivors some messages of hope. As the third day was about to end we saw the first plume of smoke appear on the horizon. It was already dark when a destroyer reached our raft and took us aboard.

Three days later we landed on the safe shores of the West African port Freetown. After the last of the rescued groups arrived, we counted our losses. Among the Poles there were fifteen men and one woman missing. What the total losses of this maritime catastrophe were was beyond me to know or even to estimate.

The next ship that we boarded was even bigger in size and more impressive in other respects. She was carried the well-known name "Mauretania" and was of French registry. This huge vessel, in spite of the enemy threat, managed to deliver us safely to our final destination, the English port of Liverpool. At last my foot stepped on the safe and solid ground of England, where I expected my euphoric aspirations to become a pilot to be fulfilled.

We did not expect any compensatory treatment on account of our wartime mishap on the sea. However, the English authorities arranged our stay in the holiday resort of Blackpool such that we had almost two months of idle vacation. Comfortable accommodation in small hotels, called "billeting", the reasonable English diet, and abundance of entertainment were the unexpected amenities. In addition, direct contacts with friendly English people and most of all with young ladies made passing the time a pleasurable experience. Meeting with local families like the Hopleys and the Buxtons, enjoying a cup of tea with the hotel caretaker, and walking down the promenade with a young lady of my choice, made me see the world in most exciting colors.

To my disappointment my medical examination did not go as well as I expected. Due to partial color blindness I did not qualify as a pilot. I was left with two choices - either to serve in the ground personnel of the Air Force, or to join the Polish armored unit stationed in Scotland. I chose the latter. After a short stay in the 300 Bomber Squadron, I started training in the fall for my new wartime profession with action expected in the European theatre. As a member of 10th Dragoons Regiment, a unit of the First Polish Armored Division, I landed a few weeks after D Day on the beaches of Normandy.

By then all allied bridgeheads were well established and the allied forces were preparing for the next stage of action. We joined them shortly before the "big push" against the heavily fortified German defense line.



**An officer with Polish Forces
in England 1943 - 1947**

The landing on the beaches of Arromanches was for me as memorable as it was a spectacular moment of my wartime experience. I stepped on the soil where some men earlier paid dearly with life and blood for the right to enter French territory. On the beaches I saw evidence of the fierce fighting - ruined armor and equipment, left burned, scattered, and destroyed on the former battlefields. I saw it as vivid testimony to human sacrifice for the benefit of mankind. There was no question that such sacrifices would be expected from us - the new troops entering the fighting.

The war exposed itself to me in its bloodiest form when we got through the ruins of Caen and crossed the Canadian-held lines. By noon, the first day of action, we drove over two miles into enemy territory. At some point we entered the green and relatively quiet valley of Crammesnil. Bravely we descended down its western slope - the tanks first and the men just behind. Suddenly hell opened up on us. German forces, dug in on the other slope, opened fire with everything they had. In no time eighteen of our tanks were burning fiercely and a rain of mortar and artillery shells fell upon us. I quickly brought my men together and in a rush withdrew from the deadly fire. That move saved us from immediate death or harm. Many of my colleagues, who were slow in judgment or lacked presence of mind remained there forever or made their exit to some military hospital.

In the days shortly thereafter followed other confrontations with the enemy, but from that first day on, we moved cautiously against their military defense lines. In spite of this prudence we became part of many tragic incidents that almost daily added casualties. There was one that I remember all too well. Due to some blunder of those in command we became victims of our own devices. Military action often provides surprises to big and small men in action; this one was bound to be heard as far as the High Command of Allied Forces.

One sunny day of early August we took over some front line positions from the Canadians in the little village of La Croix. Before us was a wide stretch of fields, gleaming with golden ripening wheat. On the other side of it a deep green line of woods formed a solid barrier to our sight. The enemy had strongholds dug in these woods, which according to the map bore the name of Hesney. The day was warm and quiet. One could stretch his body in the trench and lazily dream about better things in life to come. About noon we learned that the front line across the field was to become the scene of a rare wartime spectacle. The enemy defense line in the woods was to be "softened" with aerial bombing by some 1000 allied planes. After that show we were to undertake a frontal attack of the weakened enemy positions.

In the afternoon the allied bombers came in waves, wreaking havoc upon the German positions across the field. Then unexpectedly, one of the planes turned around and dropped its load on us. Other planes followed. Hell broke loose around us. Hundreds of bombs were exploding in front and behind us, good earth was trembling like in a shock, and everything around us seemed to be ablaze. I stayed in the shallow trench and waited patiently for a bomb marked with my name but I was one of the fortunate ones to make it through that day.

We did not go into action as scheduled; instead the Canadians sent 100 of their tanks to punch a hole in the German defenses. It was a bad move on part of the allies. The enemy defense line was reinforced with reserve units and proved to be impenetrable to the tanks. Apparently, only three of them came back intact, and a Polish tank unit that came to their help rescued 150 of their men.

This did not stop us from further fighting. There was a bloody crossing of the River Dives by the town of Jort. There was a classic tank attack at Barou, where a massive line of Canadian and Polish tanks moved in unison to deal a powerful blow to the defending enemy. Being on the left flank of the attack on an upgrade of the terrain I saw a panorama of the whole battle. It looked impressive for its size and power. Soon I saw the downside of it, when the ambulances started moving to and from, under fire, to save lives. There were men close to me who were killed and wounded; yet even in this bloody encounter I still held on to my survivor spirit. I reasoned that my time had not come yet.

Another encounter at Trun, which proved to be an important move in finally breaking through the German defenses, gave me a somber perspective of war's futility. In a short exchange of fire six German tanks burned fiercely in front of my eyes. I moved forward with my men to check on the enemy. At one of the burning tanks I saw a human body with the belly wide open. The man looked at me with begging eyes and cried: "Schiesse mich, bitte". He was in pain, and he wanted to die. Someone brought a blanket and we carried him to the back still alive.

The most glorious and gratifying military success, in which I actively participated, was the famous closing of the Falaise Gap. After breaking at Trun we moved for three days through enemy territory - sometimes fighting and sometimes avoiding German troops. Our goal was to reach the narrowing gap in the allied ring of fire through which Germans were making their last escape.

As we reached the strategic point at the Hill Mont Ormel and village of Chambois we met on our south flank with the extended arm of Gen. Patton's

advance unit. There, jointly we formed a line to block the enemy's escape route. For two days we were under constant enemy attack and constant bombardment of their mortars and artillery to which the Canadian "AGRA" (heavy artillery unit) added their "friendly" fire. At the most critical moment, when Canadian shells were falling around us, I hid under one of the tanks and wondered when the shell meant for me would come. At that point the German infantry came close enough to us to throw grenades, all the time blasting at us with machine guns. We did not spare our fire in return. There were some moments that we were not sure we could hold our positions against these desperately fierce attacks. The battle turned into a fight of wills - in the end theirs gave out first. Some 100,000 soldiers of the German Army were eliminated from the war, which meant the end to their domination of Normandy. This battle also secured the liberation of the whole of France. The site of the bitter fighting was later named by the Canadians "The Polish Battlefield" and became the focal point of visiting generals and war correspondents.

Today, a massive monument with a Polish tank in front of it and a museum inside Mont Ormel hill commemorates the men of all nations that took part in this great allied victory. As I recall those days I mention them with pride as a great Polish military achievement and my personal accomplishment as a soldier who fought there and survived.

Soon after the Battle of Falaise, we moved further to liberate several French towns and cities, being everywhere greeted by enthusiastic crowds who lined the streets. All along the roadside the French people presented us with flowers and wine, and some pretty female faces treated us with hugs and kisses. In this victory parade, as it appeared to me, there were also some tears for those who died and the suffering that was over.



There was one day that was especially painful to me. After moving smoothly for some days we encountered some enemy opposition at

Before being wounded at the battle at Borsum, 1944

the French town of St. Omer. Following the order to attack a hill on the periphery of the town I met with heavy German machine gun fire. In front of my eyes two of my men fell dead, neither of them was older than twenty. Somehow I escaped their fate although my position was more exposed to enemy fire than theirs. We got their bodies and our equipment out of the fire but psychologically I agonized over their deaths for quite some time.

Today one can read their names on a monument erected by the citizens in a prominent part of the town. In this way the city St.Omer showed its gratitude to the soldiers of my unit who gave their lives on foreign soil for the freedom of another nation. One who witnessed the incident may derive some personal pride, but for posterity it is yet another small memorial to the war.

The victorious route led us through the rest of France and the southern provinces of Belgium. Everywhere we met with the joy and happiness of liberated people. Again these congratulations and thankful celebrations lasted only up to a point. The smooth sailing ended abruptly as we entered the Dutch province of Zeeland.

Heavy fighting erupted on the Axel-Huils Canal. Our goal was to secure the land that controlled the entrance to the strategic Belgian port, Antwerp. Our big problem was that much of the Zeeland territory had been flooded by the Germans, who blew up dikes to render the area inaccessible to Allies. Our slow and difficult fighting followed raised roads that were easy for the enemy to defend but almost impossible for us to advance on. Our losses were staggering. My regiment alone lost 125 men, killed, wounded, and missing in one day's battle. At some point I carried on a duel with a German tank shelling the trenches in which our troops sought shelter. Unfortunately, having my anti-tank gun set insecurely on the top of the dike I missed twice. The German tank then withdrew. Eventually we secured the land two days later.

If one visits the town of Axel today, one would find a piece of Poland there. Some town streets bear such names as Pilsudski, Sikorski, Paderewski, Chopin, and Gen. Maczek; there is also a Szydlowski bus terminal and a monument to us in the main square; and on the dike where many of my colleagues died the Dragoon Cross stands tall and high over the battlefield.

The fallen men were buried in the local cemetery, the wounded were removed to military hospitals and we, the able and alive, moved further to liberate the other provinces of Holland. On the way we had quite a few encounters with retreating German forces. The biggest and most important was the strategic battle for the city of Breda. There, on the Dutch southern border, German forces put up stiff resistance to our attacking units. We, the Poles, had them facing us at the point of Baarle Nassau, Alphen woods, and village of Dorst.



In one powerful push we broke the first lines of German defense and by the third day reached the outskirts of Breda. The city came out of this action almost without a scar for the price of some 800 Polish men killed and wounded, including seven men of my platoon. The people of Breda showed their gratitude to us in many ways. As we entered the city the joyous people greeted us with welcoming signs, with flowers, and with unmatched friendliness. Now, one may find there streets bearing Polish names, a monument to us in a prominent place, the Polish Veterans Museum, and all of us who fought there were awarded the city's honorary citizenship. In the village of Dorst two of my men have streets named after them for giving their lives fighting for that place.

The allied success forced the Germans to withdraw behind the River Mass, a natural line of defense in the land that was criss-crossed with many natural and man-made waterways. We spent the whole winter of 1944/1945 along the southern bank of the river in stationary action. The danger of wartime action extended in some cases further than the river line. I became subject to one in an incident that had almost nothing to do with the front line.

After my turn at an outpost was over, I took a short leave that was due to me. I visited some Belgian friends and relaxed in the officers' hotel in Antwerp.

That important allied port was then under siege by German flying bombs, called "V2" rockets. As I stopped at the military café, I suddenly heard a huge explosion and saw everything around me falling to pieces. The bomb exploded on the main thoroughfare to Brussels and did a lot of damage to the city's property. I walked out of the building through a blown out window, helped a wounded woman on the street, and went from the city to the nearby place of Schilde to seek some rest with a Belgian family whom I befriended few months earlier.

In March 1945, we moved to the eastern territories of Holland; again liberating cities, towns, and villages and losing men and equipment in battles that came our way. Among them there was one that I am unlikely ever to forget.

On April the 10th the regiment in which I served reached the Oranie Canal in the Dutch province of Drenthe. At this point we were given quite a task. In the first stage we were to secure the bridgehead on the canal and to take the city of Emmen. Further north there was a battalion of French paratroopers surrounded by a large German force. To free them from the siege was the second goal of our operation, which was in fact the true goal of the whole operation.

My platoon was to cross the canal and establish a bridgehead at the ruins of a lesser bridge on the right flank of the attack. With the help of our tanks we achieved that goal and took some German prisoners in the process. While still at the bridgehead I moved to the front to rescue a wounded Dutch woman. Unexpectedly, I found myself facing three German soldiers, trying to escape. They fired at me with three of their machine guns. They missed me by inches - again I survived. I presume it was a lucky escape for me as much as for them.

Shortly before dusk I got the order to move to the horizon and watch for enemy movements in and around the town. As darkness came I got my next order - to enter the town and set up a post at the main crossroads and wait for the arrival of the main force. This was to take place after our engineers completed the bridge on the canal.

The place was dead silent as I marched with my platoon down the main street. I had a suspicion, though, that many curious eyes, looking into darkness through their windows, tried to find out who was walking their street at that late hour of the night. The next morning the rest of our troops arrived and for me there was another spectacle to see. People of the city went wild with joy. There was an outpouring of happiness by the citizens of the town freed barely a few hours earlier.

These people did not forget us. Today one can find Polish Street there and a monument of gratitude erected at a square close to the main railway station. There was also a piece of glory for me as well - I was recognized as the first allied soldier who entered the city on that memorable spring night. But my fighting days were numbered. Soon after crossing the German western border I met with a sniper's bullet at a place called Borsum while I was leading my platoon against the enemy stronghold. At the start of the action the fire was rather light and it appeared to me that the fighting would be over in no time. Some shrapnel were exploding above us, some mortar and artillery shells were bursting in front of us, and a reconnaissance platoon gave us its machine gun support on the right flank. We moved slowly but steadily towards the edge of the woods on the hill without receiving direct fire from the enemy. Then suddenly the first bullet that came from the other side hit me in the face.

By some miracle I managed to get out of the fire, which rapidly intensified. I reached the nearest carrier of the reconnaissance platoon and, unconscious, I was delivered to the first aid point. As I was told later, the doctor declared me a fatality and did not even bother to dress my wound. The chaplain being of the same mind said the last rites over me. I was placed in the ambulance with another wounded man and sent to the field hospital in Nijmegen. The wounded man died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. The original doctor's prognosis with regard to me proved to be incorrect. My wound was not a life threatening injury, although it was very painful and terrifying at the time.

The sight of the field hospital opened before me another very tragic side of the war. I became witness to many dying and suffering casualties of the war. Even to me, who had seen the misery of Kolyma and dead and wounded on battlefields, this place was a sorry and depressing sight. Men wounded with bullet holes, burned in tanks, and hit by shrapnel lay in rows on the floor or stretchers, all suffering and moaning. Here I saw the worst victims of the war. As I looked at the hall filled with pained bodies I imagined that this was the way that purgatory would look; that was the way the suffering sinners must suffer in hell. But, these men who were suffering excruciating pain were no sinners - they were the victims of the insane world created by ambitious, confused, and callous minds. I suffered with those men on the floor, and with some of them I was taken by train to a military hospital in Belgium.

While I was recovering from my wound, the armistice was loudly announced through hospital wards on May 7th, 1945. Bottles of champagne appeared from nowhere, nurses provided cups and glasses and my English and Canadian companions drank, sang, and rejoiced. I understood their reason for the celebration - for them the war was over and soon they were to go back home to enjoy a peaceful civilian life. I could not share with them their exultation. At the

back of my mind was the Yalta agreement, which gave half of Poland to the Soviet Union, including my hometown. This practically barred me from returning to my country, even to the part that was not annexed by the Soviets. The new Poland was under communist rule and I, as a former Soviet prisoner, could not expect decent treatment from the new system.

That was my dilemma and I had to live with it.

So the victorious war ended for me and many Poles on a very sad and sour note. For us there was no victory in the Allied triumph. We, who had fought the Nazis from the very first day of the conflict, became victims of underhanded political manipulations and illegal treaties. At this point I also parted with history. The chapter had closed abruptly and left me alone and bitter at a crossroads of my life.

There was an emptiness around me on which I was to build another life in another country that would be prepared to give me a home and some means of living. The question was what country would it be and what means would be open to me. Considering all this I opted for green and friendly England, where I expected my wartime English friends to make my adjustment easier.

My hopes returned to schooling, where I expected to find within the walls of one of the many institutions of higher learning in London. My conviction was that there had to be a place for me where I could acquire knowledge, so much needed by me on this new path of life.

Before I took my uniform off I found my new Alma Mater in the business school affiliated with the famous London School of Economics. There, helped with a government scholarship, I went digging for knowledge that would provide me with a reasonable profession. In the end I left the school with several certificates of which the one in accounting proved to be the most useful. In fact, it gave rise to my lifelong profession.

Accounting being a subject of international nature seemed to have an application in every country, except where special conditions made it irrelevant. The post-war law in England officially did not bar any foreigner from taking employment in any profession, provided that no Englishman applied for such a post at the same time or earlier. In practice, it meant that there would be no employment for me in any business in England. Among Englishmen there were many demobilized men looking for jobs and the openings were few. However, I

found a way that made me a useful and productive person within English society.

After having finished school I joined a friend of mine in a photography business, putting all my savings as an investment into this one-man enterprise. For a long time it was a hard struggle to make ends meet. Then turning to a simple idea of taking children's pictures at home, we stepped upon a fairly profitable venture. In a short time we gave employment to some sixty men - agents, photographers, salesmen, and deliverymen. Our operation covered the whole of England, Wales, and was reaching into southern towns of Scotland.

At that point everything looked good, except that photography had no aspects of permanency and stability. My next idea was to go into a more stable line that would secure our future business operation. My friend, the major partner, was in full agreement with my reasoning, but was too much sold on photography and some pleasures of life to make a change. Hence, we never moved towards something more secure.

In between there were some developments in my life of more personal nature. My parents and my brothers came back from Siberia and settled down in the western part of Poland. Through some relatives I established contact with them. By sending parcels with food and clothing I tried to make their living conditions easier. There was no way to visit them, because the Iron Curtain would not allow it. Frequent exchanges of letters made up to some extent for the separation. Their living in Poland was not easy but much better than they had in the wide steppe of Khazakstan. Whatever they had was definitely better than utter misery in the Soviet land.

On the English front I met an attractive young English lady, while vacationing in a holiday resort in Brighton. Our closer relationship developed almost outright. She happened to live only few streets away from me in the southern part of London. By profession she was a dress designer, which was quite a profitable profession. A few years later we married and started a family in our own home, which was located in the London district called Ladywell.

Within first four years we were blessed with three lovely children - two girls and a boy, whom we named Alexandra, Victoria and Wladyslaw, respectively. On this side everything so far looked good. With my income better than average I could manage to meet my family obligations on my own. My wife's income was temporarily suspended, as she had to perform the function of mother and lady of the house.

As I predicted earlier, photography was gradually becoming a less profitable business. Some differences between me and my friend led to my departure from our joint venture. Instead, I started a business of my own in the line of my wife's profession. Putting our heads and our resources together we started a dress manufacturing company in the London district called Catford Hill. As always is the case, the beginning was difficult and it was a big strain on both of us. It took quite some time and a lot of our effort before some results were visible.

At the end of the third year the business progressed. We increased our staff to 26 people. Encouraged by this we aimed even further. With several dress samples accepted by a well-known West End fashion house prospects looked bright. Unfortunately, our best intentions met with adversities, which were not of our making and which were beyond our control.

While busy with organizing the business and personal life we hardly noticed the outside culprit that stepped in and undermined our effort. The culprit was international politics, which brought England into the Suez Canal conflict. The result of the military intervention was a general depression in the country to which our business fell a victim. For lack of orders we had to close the shop and suspend the operation. Temporarily, I went back to photography to secure the income needed to maintain the family.

One day, while reading a newspaper report of wonderful opportunities in the countries across the ocean, my wife and I decided to seek our chances in a new and dynamic country like Canada. Soon I was off to Toronto to prepare grounds for the family who were to follow me later. Relying on information that was reaching us in England I was absolutely convinced that I had taken the right road to our future.

On arrival in Toronto I found that there was much exaggeration in all the glossy and promising reports. The country was in recession, like England, employment was hard to find, and to start a dressmaking business would have been suicidal. That section of the industry belonged to New York and a Canadian entrepreneur would have little chance to succeed. However, once on the new road of life I did not feel like turning back. Fortunately my wife was of the same opinion.

After some searching and many telephone calls I secured employment with a construction company as its general and cost accountant. The overall business position of the company was rather shaky. Building projects were few to

bid and competition did its best to undercut them to the point that they were becoming a losing proposition. Fortunately the company had some of its side resources like two apartment buildings, a medical clinic, and an old rental unit; all of them together kept the business alive. Business was getting worse and even the income generated by the sidelines did not provide sufficient funds to cover construction losses. Debts were piling up and loans from banks growing.

In the midst of it my family arrived from England. By then I had a house ready for them with some furniture in to make their conditions livable. My wife, an English woman to the bone, although impressed in the beginning by the new way of life, lost interest in Canada after seeing the lesser side of it. She wanted to go back to the old country where life was slower but more secure; I still lived with the hope that everything would turn out for the best. While we were weighing our ideas an accident happened that involved my younger daughter. The legal side of the incident forced all of us to stay longer in Canada. We had to resolve this problem before making the next move.

By the time the legal suit was over we changed our mind and decided to try our luck in USA. Since my wife was British there was no problem with getting permanent visa or acquiring the so-called green card. On my fortieth birthday, June 1st, 1960, we crossed the American border at Sarnia and entered another land of great expectations.

Our intended place of stay was Chicago where some of our friends lived and where, on account of the large Polish population, I expected to get some employment with ease. A day later, driving a second-hand car which I bought in Canada, I followed La Salle Street to turn at some point towards Humboldt Park, where wartime my friends lived. After staying a day or two with them I rented an apartment in the same neighborhood and bought some furniture to start new life in this country that had inspired some hopes in my wife and me.

When we arrived in USA the economic situation of the country was not at its best. This period later became known to its citizens as Eisenhower's recession. My experience in Canada taught me that finding employment is difficult when the economy is down. For me as a newcomer it would be even harder to secure a position within my qualifications. Again I started writing resumes, making calls, and visiting places with no success for quite a few weeks.

Eventually, with the help of an employment agency I secured an accounting position in a department store on the south side of Chicago. It was not a job I would want to stay in for life. Six working days a week, unpaid overtime,

and a long way to commute was no bargain for a family man. I knew from the very beginning that I could not carry on like this for long. The good side of this employment was my friendly relationship with the employer, whose Jewish family had come from Poland a generation ago.

One day my employment agent called me and presented me with an offer of another job. It was an accounting position in a welfare agency, located in Hyde Park, where I, as he said, would meet nice and influential people and where conditions of employment were rather good. A day or two later I called at the agency's address for an interview. A week later I received a letter of acceptance.

There were some special points included in the terms of employment, which made me sure that I had made a good move. Most appreciated were a five-day week and a better salary. The latter improved considerably after less than a year when the institution moved into a new office building. At that point I was offered the position of business manager and comptroller. That was quite a boost to my ego and to the economics side of my family.

With this new employment I had more time for myself, my wife, and my children. I also had time to give some attention to the betterment of our living conditions. I already had a house in Logan Square, which needed some renovation and I bought some acreage with an old house on it in Michigan, planning to make it our summer home. Gradually, I improved both places and my life became safe, secure, and most of all, stabilized.

At the beginning, unrecognized by me then, there was another good point in terms of this employment - within term of it there was the medical coverage for me and my family. That proved to be important, which saved many of my financial problems in the near future. My wife developed a serious illness against which there was no recourse. There was nothing one could do except to wait and hope for a miracle to happen. The miracle cure never materialized. After three years of doctors, hospitals, operations, and endless medication the agony of death entered our home.

In the past I had witnessed death many times, but having it in the family makes a man feel it so much deeper and in a much more painful way. The loss of my companion hit me hard and left big scars on the children and me. At the time the oldest of them was hardly ten and the youngest only six years old. In my life of ups and down this was a very bitter point. Parting for good with a very close person is never easy and it was not easy for me.

I thought then how lucky I was in changing my employment just before illness entered my home. Without extra free time, without better income, and without sufficient medical coverage I would have been sunk deep in all kinds of financial obligations. They surely would have made my life difficult for quite some time to come. I got through the hardship with my material resources almost intact. That enabled me to proceed with the education of my children by sending them to private high schools and colleges. Being away from home, apart from acquiring knowledge, they got a taste of personal independence for which many young people of the time seemed to be yearning.

In time I entered into a new marriage - this time with a Polish lady, who was a great help to me in starting another life. To arrange a better future for us we bought a better house in Chicago and few years later a better one in suburban Morton Grove before going into retirement. Also together we put some effort and money into the place in Michigan, making it a real retreat for us and our children. It proved quite a blessing to us in our senior years for it provided us with many little projects and interests that kept our bodies and minds active.

The marriage this time is more Polish than English, but it does not really matter as long as it makes sense. There were some difficult times, which growing children always provide but eventually everything evened up for them and us. To see the children getting educated, settled in employment, married and having their own families seemed to make sense to all of us. Within this there was some satisfaction that creates good feelings to all members of the family.

There is also much sense and pleasure in having the third generation around us, coming for Christmas, Easter, and vacation in our summer home. There were nine of them, all of different characters, and all needing different kinds of attention and guidance. In that respect grandparents seem to be very useful. Unfortunately, the number of our grandchildren decreased to eight. The oldest of our grandsons died tragically in a road accident on New Year's Eve soon after his eighteenth birthday.



**At home in Morton Grove,
Illinois, USA 1995.**

Once my personal life got settled, I turned attention to the deep past - to my parents and brothers. Soon after I entered into the new marriage I made my first trip to Poland to visit my aging parents and the rest of the family on the Polish side. The parents looked old and tired but still in good spirit. Their life was less than what they had enjoyed in pre-war Poland but, better than what the

Soviet Union had to offer. My brothers were married, had their homes and families and lived lives typical of average citizens in post-war Poland. It was quite an experience for me to finally visit with my family after 35 years of separation, and it was quite a memorable event for all my relatives also.

Now, after retirement, I find enough time to write about my past experiences - something I always wanted to do. Whatever I put on the paper may have more value personally than the history in which I participated. Still, there are some episodes of my past that were recognized by Polish newspapers, and my wartime memoirs, written soon after the war ended, are being used by some historians in Poland and Holland. In all my retirement activities my basic intention is to live the uneventful life of a senior citizen with the young spirit of a man rich in life's experience.

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