



EDWARD BIAŁOUS

Corporal Edward Białous, 28 years old, a Post Office employee, unmarried, born on 3 April 1914 in the village of Kantorówka, commune and district of Sokółka, Białystok voivodeship.

In order to avoid deportation to Germany for forced labor – and I had already been selected – I decided to flee the clutches of the Germans and escape from the lubelskie voivodeship to the Soviet side, where my family happened to live. And thus on the evening of 9 February 1940 I proceeded to the Bug River in the vicinity of Brześć. After crossing the Bug, I started to go round in circles in the snowdrifts, this due to my unfamiliarity with the terrain; I simply didn't know which way to go. I met a local peasant whom I asked the way, but he – on the pretext of guiding me to the proper road – instead led me to a Soviet watchtower, where I was promptly detained. It was dusk, and so the soldiers took me to the peasant's hut, where there were already five others like myself, and therefore I grew certain that I had been stopped only for a while and would soon be let go. But late in the evening two soldiers came up from the watchtower and searched us, whereafter they wrote down a report and at the same time relieved me of my personal belongings. I spent the night sleeping on the ground; unfortunately, from now on I had a guard by my side, his bayonet fixed. On the second day after breakfast – luckily, I still had my own rations – they drove us on foot to Brześć nad Bugiem, some twenty kilometers distant. Two soldiers with bayonets fixed, supported by a dog, urged us on from behind.

In Brześć, they took us to the Bridgettine Convent; there were a great many people there – the cell in which they put me already contained some two hundred men. There was no way that we could lie down comfortably, and throughout the night we slept (or sat) one on top of another. In order to relieve ourselves, we would use the courtyard, which was fenced by a wall with a large gate. Women and men were kept in separate cells, however they were let out for



the walk (once daily) practically together, and could stroll around the entire courtyard side by side, while those who remained in their cells would use the opportunity to relieve themselves into buckets; these, however, were usually full to overflowing, and thus it was often the case that in the morning people would get up from puddles of urine, resembling pigs waking up in a sty. Once daily, we would be fed with soup, which consisted of millet groats boiled in water; our portion would be a few table spoons of this cloudy liquid, accompanied by two slices of bread, some 300 grams in total. Such a diet left people too weak to walk. Staggering along, they would hold the wall for balance. It was difficult to get down the stairs, for the prison at the Bridgettine Convent was storied, while people would literally be collapsing from hunger. I remember that I had to support myself against the wall in order not to fall, for I was very dizzy. People were summoned for interrogation on a daily basis, and oftentimes locked up in the punishment cell in order to make them more ready to admit to whatever the Soviets wanted. Since the place was overcrowded – for fresh groups of people would arrive daily – after three weeks the Soviets organized a large escort, armed with rifles and bayonets, and transferred us to another prison, in Brześć nad Bugiem, near Muchawiec, where we were welcomed by a different sight: an enormous building that could accommodate as many as 10,000 men. They would pack thirty people into each cell (originally intended for six beds), so that – as I have mentioned previously – we slept squeezed like herrings in a barrel. The prison building – modern, clean, with four stories – looked very presentable, but it had one major drawback, which everyone noticed; namely, it had been built by us Poles – a nice prison in which we were now forced to sit. We had built it for ourselves. People were summoned to interrogations every day, suffering terribly, for they would be beaten, starved and frozen by the Soviets in order to force them to turn others in or to admit to their false charges. My examinations were not as terrible, for by the purest of luck I had been assigned a more humane interrogator. When the summer came, we started suffocating in our cells, since it was very hot and the place was crammed full with inmates. Throughout this time the guards did not allow us to open any windows; if anyone attempted to do so, he would be sent to the punishment cell immediately. We got round the problem in the following way: one of us would stand just opposite the peep-hole, thereby covering it and making it impossible for the guard to see anything, while a colleague would open the casement window to let in some fresh air. Once daily we were herded to the lavatory, which in fact was nothing more than a ventilated cell. The heat, lack of air and stench from the *parasha* [a bucket-cum-chamber pot] caused our bodies to rot; everyone had various sores and swellings, and this



was all aggravated by the lice. After five months without shaving, each of us had a waist-length beard. We were allowed a bath once every three months. Initially, we had no means of washing our clothes, but after a few months they laundered our shirts – on two occasions, and later started trimming our beards with a shaver.

New prisoners were brought in practically every day and dispersed amongst the cells; from them we would get fresh news, although we also used Morse code to obtain information from neighboring cells. When we were allowed to go and smoke, the Soviets gave us cut up newspapers to roll cigarettes. Then, we would put together a few dozen fragments and reconstruct the entire newspaper so as to read what the Soviets had to say about world affairs.

The majority of inmates in my cell were Poles, but there were also a few Jews and Byelorussians; our mutual relations were more or less amicable. I would like to add some information about how we would communicate between ourselves: while in the toilet, people would leave various signs and ingeniously hidden inscriptions. When our women were cleaning the prison corridor, we would avail ourselves of the guards' inattention and move such signs and messages from one cell to another; to be honest, we soon had our own "broadcasting station".

In September, without any prior notice, they started trying us en masse. The procedure was very short, for you would only be informed, for example, that you had been sentenced to three years of forced labor. After such a "trial", the hapless victim would be deported to Russia. On 19 October, after spending nine months in jail, we were taken in prison vans to the station, where they loaded us – our entire transport – into goods wagons. The train left Brześć nad Bugiem on the evening of the same day.

We traveled for three weeks. It was very cramped, and although the frost had started to set in, they gave us hardly any coal, so that we had to burn blankets just to keep warm. Neither did they give us any water, but we received some dry provisions, such as frozen bread and very salty herrings; having eaten the latter, people would scream for water, however the Soviets gave us no more than a few droplets per day. At night, at nearly every stop – and there would be as many as four – groups of soldiers barged into the wagon and counted us over to make sure that no one had run away. They also used some heavy object, a hammer perhaps, to bang on the roof and side doors of the wagon in order to find any escape holes.



Once, when someone cut out a small opening in the wall, they took five of our colleagues to the punishment cell in the special wagon, where there were no doors or windows, and arranged them face down in the 10-degree frost to force them to give up the person who had cut out the orifice and inform of the tools that he had used. After lying prostrate, naked, for an hour, they were unable to walk back; the Soviets carried them over to our wagon and threw them in like logs. With great difficulty, we managed to warm them and bring them back to life.

I myself was ill throughout the journey; my right side swelled and a lump the size of two fists developed. Finally, we arrived in the Arkhangelsk Oblast, where we were offloaded at Łuchtanga station, near Yertsevo. We were driven on foot from the station to the camp – which was located deep in the forest, some eleven kilometers distant – with dogs speeding up our march. In the evening of the same day, after appearing at a medical board, I was ordered to go to the hospital, which was near the train station. I was walked there the next day, thoroughly ill, covering the same snow-covered route that we had taken the day before.

When I finally lay down, it took me a long time to get up. The medical care in hospital was passable, however the facility was intended for those who were sure to die in a few days. I was feverish for five months, while pus seeped out of my right side for nine. Once my fever subsided, I was transferred to a different hospital – one for invalids. One Antezak, a Pole from the village of Tartaków near Baranowicze, had been brought in before me. Although only 36 years old, he had caught a cold in the forest, and this led to heart muscle paralysis and inflammation of the kidneys, whereafter in January 1941, having spent a week in hospital, he died a very painful death. He suffered terribly, I could hardly bear to look at him. In the camp I was tended to by a Polish doctor, Major Latała, who took very good care of us Poles. It is thanks to him that I somehow survived. While in the invalids' hospital, I met a 40-year-old Pole from Warsaw – I do not remember his surname – who died next to me of asthma and stomach ailments. The next to perish was Buszyło, a Byelorussian, 45 years old, from near Pińsk – Major Latała attended all the surgical procedures, but there was nothing he could do to save him. There were only invalids in this hospital: Russians, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Georgians, Poles, Ukrainians, Cossacks and others. The living conditions were very bad. We received food twice daily – for breakfast and supper. Some watery soup and fish or kasha, the hunger was terrible. If any dog wandered up to the camp, it would be killed and eaten as a delicacy.



When I was detained in prison, I could not establish any contact with my family, while when in camp I was allowed to reply to every second letter received from home and send two parcels with a few rubles. Later on I lost touch again, right until the outbreak of the German-Bolshevik war.

People in the camp worked fourteen hours per day, getting up at five in the morning and going to bed at ten or eleven. I was in the hospital, so I didn't work in the forest practically until my release. The barracks were extremely dirty – each had so many bugs that people had to sleep outside (obviously not in winter). And in winter it was cold, with the temperature falling to minus 60 degrees or more.

Until finally, on 14 October, a small group of us – 23 in total – were freed. As usual, they let us go in batches, in this instance two. Fifty of our colleagues were left behind. We were led from the camp to Yertsevo, some twenty kilometers distant, where we were given release documents permitting us to go wherever we wanted, and also herrings, bread and money as provisions for the trip. Apart from the herrings, I received 45 rubles, using which I traveled for a month and a half, finally reaching the Polish Army on 25 November. Throughout my journey I didn't stop in any kolkhoz; I always got on any train I could. I even marched on foot between a few stations, just to get to my destination quicker. When I had no choice, I would wait at the filthy train stations.

There were masses of people there, however it was impossible to buy any food. The buffets were empty, gutted by the fleeing Soviets, who cleaned everything out like a swarm of locusts. The trains and stations were full of people. Until finally, on 24 November 1941, after many difficulties, I got to Buzuluk, and from there to Totskoye, where I was examined by a medical board, receiving category C, and enlisted in the army, in the 7th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion.

And thus my civilian history drew to a close, and a new – better – chapter began, the dreamed of story of a Polish soldier, initially in Russia, but finally outside its borders.

Official stamp, 3 March 1943