



## **BERNARD CHODOFF**

### **1. Personal data:**

Senior Sergeant Bernard Chodoff, born in 1891, regular non-commissioned officer, married.

### **2. Date and circumstances of arrest:**

Acting on orders, on 19 September 1939 I crossed the border between Poland and Lithuania. On 18 September at 5.00 p.m. the company which I headed was manning a defensive section stretching from a transmitter to the Rossa cemetery in Wilno. At 7.15 p.m. a messenger came to my company with a letter from the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Szyłejko, ordering me to take my company and march to the highway between Wilno and Grodno. 75% of my company consisted of Belarussians, who refused to go to Grodno, abandoned their weapons and went in the direction of Oszmiana, their home town. I gathered a small group of soldiers and marched as ordered. The soldiers who went with me were inhabitants of Wilno. At Legionowa Street they declared that they wouldn't go with me either, but would go home instead. At Legionowa Street I met Cpt. Mickiewicz, an officer from my battalion. He told me that an order had been issued to cross the Polish-Lithuanian border.

Cpt. Mickiewicz hailed a taxi which was going in the direction of the border, we got in and went to the Lithuanian border. On 19 September at 4.00 a.m. we crossed the border in Zawiasy, and the same car took us to the Lithuanian camp, Kulatowo. On the following day I was assigned to the group of Lieutenant-Colonel Cymer. I stayed in that camp until 19 March 1940, and then I was transferred to the camp in Vilkaviškis. On 12 July 1940 Soviet troops arrived at the camp and took us all to the Soviet Union.

### **3. The name of the camp, prison, or forced labor site:**

We were transported in sealed cattle wagons with barred windows, and for two days and nights we received neither water nor food. After 48 hours, when we arrived at some station, two buckets of dried fish and black biscuits were thrown into our wagon; at the next station we received water, but it was stale and dirty.



On 16 July 1940 the train stopped at the Nitochnaya station, situated 240 kilometers from Smolensk. At 8.00 a.m. we were ordered to get out and arrange ourselves in fours. The NKVD soldiers, armed with rifles and light machine guns, surrounded us; a second line was composed of soldiers with dogs on long leashes, and a third of cavalry. In this sort of column we were marched to the camp, which was located 34 kilometers from the station. At 5.30 p.m. we reached the camp, where we spent three hours lying in front of the entrance gate, waiting for the soldiers to collect the rest of our soldiers left on the road. When we were finally admitted to the camp courtyard, we were thoroughly searched and herded to the bathhouse. The bathing of 3,800 people lasted for three and a half hours. There were 20 showers in the bathhouse, and each had to accommodate from eight to ten people. After the bath we were taken to buildings that could house up to 400 people, but 700 or more people had to live there.

#### **4. Description of the camp, prison:**

The camp was situated in the woods – it was on the property of a former tsarist prince, Orlov. It was a pleasant location, surrounded with a pine forest and with a river flowing nearby, but it was also surrounded with three rows of barbed wire and had no exit.

As for the hygiene, it left much to be desired: underwear was washed by the inmates, and conditions for performing this task were awful, especially in winter, when water would freeze in the washing tubs, as the barn where the washing was done was not heated. In order to wash the underwear of one company, composed of a hundred people of whom everyone was given one change of underwear and a towel, ten people from the company had to go the washing room and wash the entire company's underwear from 9.00 a.m. to 2.00 p.m.

#### **5. The composition of prisoners-of-war, inmates, exiles:**

3,800 non-commissioned officers and privates were detained in the camp. The majority of them were Roman Catholics.

#### **6. Camp life:**

Every day at 8.00 a.m. a trumpet call summoned us to assemble in the courtyard and arrange ourselves in fours, each company separately. Then a Bolshevik officer would count us and



take us for work on the camp premises, where we were erecting a building that was to house a theater. We worked from 8.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m., without remuneration and regardless of weather. As for clothing, the Bolsheviks issued the foremen who supervised our work with boots and padded jackets, but the rest had to make crude shoes of wood covered with cloth, which had to last them the whole winter; we used to wrap our feet in rags. As late as in the spring of 1941 the Soviet authorities began to distribute boots, padded jackets and underwear, but they were given only to those who worked as specialists; those who worked irregularly were told by the Bolsheviks that they didn't need these articles, as they worked very little.

Cultural life in the camp: every other day the Bolsheviks screened a propaganda movie about life in the Soviet Union, in villages and factories, and about private life. A balalaika prisoners' orchestra, conducted by a platoon leader from the 1st Uhlan Regiment, was set up in the camp. There were talks each Tuesday, delivered by Bolshevik political commissars, on a variety of topics related to politics, economy, and state matters. In February 1941 one of the inmates, Józef Dobrowolski, a former headmaster of an elementary school in Maladzyechna, began to form Bolshevik *yacheykas* (cells) and recruit inmates; about a hundred people of various backgrounds volunteered, including even regular non-commissioned officers. The course lasted for three months, with lectures every day after 6.00 p.m., and political commissars took turns delivering them. At the end of the course, the chief political commissar himself examined the participants.

#### **7. The NKVD's attitude towards Poles:**

As for the Soviet authorities' attitude towards inmates, some of them were quite decent, but some were dogs. One could sense that many Bolsheviks were in fact Poles from the Soviet city of Minsk, but they didn't reveal their nationality; these were the worst.

#### **8. Medical assistance:**

As for medical assistance, some of the inmates were renowned physicians, famous in Poland, but unfortunately we were short on medications. The emergency room was supplied only with aspirin, quinine, ricin, and a few types of ointment; even bandages to make a dressing were lacking. We always heard the same answer: "Moscow hasn't sent them yet."



**9. Was there any possibility to get in contact with one's country and family?**

When we arrived at the camp, the Bolsheviks told us that once we were registered – which would take up to four weeks – we would be released home. Six weeks later we were informed that we could write one letter of 25 words to our families. They used our letters to get to know what was going on in our country. During 14 months I wrote four letters and received three letters from home. These three letters resembled net curtains – a Bolshevik cut out the parts he didn't like with scissors.

**10. When was the prisoner released and how did he join the army?**

On 26 August 1941, General Władysław Anders and General Szyszko-Bohusz arrived at the camp in Gryazovets, near Vologda, and told us that if we wanted to, we could join the Polish Army. Three days after the general's departure, the delegate of the Polish Government, Lieutenant-Colonel Stanisław Pstrokoński, came to the camp and established a District Draft Office at the camp for conscripting us into the army. On 2 September 1941 at 3.00 p.m. the Bolsheviks opened up the camp gate and more than 1,600 officers and over 400 privates marched off to the train station in Gryazovets. On 7 September 1941 I was in the camp Totskoye, where I was appointed head of the 1st Rifle Company in the 19th Infantry Regiment.

21 January 1943