



JÓZEF CZAPLICKI

Platoon Leader Józef Czaplicki, 44 years old, married, Roman Catholic, tradesman by profession, two dependent children: Janina (10 years old) and Krystyna (9 years old).

In September, when the Soviet troops entered Poland, I was living in the small town of Łunna, Grodno district. Partisans recruiting from among the local Belarusian populace began to arrest and persecute the Poles; I was taken to the police station several times and told to hand over arms that were in my possession, but I didn't comply with this order until the very end. As I knew that I would be arrested – I was a Polish Army volunteer since 1918, I served in the police, I was a member of several state organizations (and since this was publicly known, the moment had to come sooner or later) – I stocked up on as much food for the whole family as I could afford, and then I parted from my loved ones and went in the direction of Warsaw.

On 6 January 1940 I was arrested at the border and incarcerated in some basement, where I met several dozen men and women. The basement was so cramped that it was difficult to turn around [?], but it didn't break our spirits and nobody wept. On 10 January, following a segregation of prisoners, I was sent together with some other people to the prison in Łomża, where I was tortured and suffered many horrible things during interrogations. Listening to the convulsive crying of our women was most unbearable. Prayer was our only comfort, and we prayed twice a day in hushed voices. Twice I spent three days in solitary confinement for talking with my friends through the walls [?].

Solitary confinement was horrible. One was taken to a dark basement in one's shirt, drawers, and boots (without socks), bareheaded. There were many night searches in the cells, and the suspects were taken one by one to isolation cells, where they were beaten unconscious.

On 29 June 1940 we – about 500 men and women – were deported to Homel (USSR). On the way, as we were passing the station in Grodno, I sent word to my family through some friends, telling my family not to worry, as the moment of liberation would come.



During our journey we received 400 grams of bread and a liter of un-boiled water. For the last three days we didn't receive any bread, only a liter of cold water per day. We began to yell "give us bread" from our cars, but they remained indifferent and it was to no avail. We were forbidden to come close to the windows, otherwise we would be poked with bayonets. The cars were unbearably stuffy.

We were unloaded at the station in Homel, and when the formalities were completed we were placed in the cells, several dozen people per cell. We all lay naked there. In that place I met one priest, a prefect from Hajnówka, Białystok district, who instilled hope in me that I would return to my homeland. He tried to reason with everyone and comfort them. In July I fell ill and spent 22 days in the hospital, where my punishment was read out to me – I was sentenced to eight years of forced labor. Still infirm, I was sent with the above-mentioned Father Wilniewicz to a Gulag camp in Kotlas. Another reorganization was carried out there and in October, when the temperatures had already fallen below zero, they began to send us for permanent work unloading boards by the Dvina River. We worked day and night, but we still kept our spirits up. Many people suffered from leg ailments, but our doctors didn't treat them as legitimate health problems.

One night in November, 250 men were gathered, formed into *kolonna* [column] no 5 and marched off to the taiga. On the way we were forbidden to talk or to fall behind our friends, for which we were punished with rifle-butting. At 1.00 a.m. we arrived at a spot in the woods, built a fire and lay in the snow until morning. After roll call they gave us some hot water and we began to clear the snow, fell trees and erect a fence around the site. After dinnertime we received 400 grams of bread per person; we were told that the food supplies hadn't yet been delivered. When we had built the fence, we put up tarpaulin tents in which we lived for over two months. We slept in our clothes, we didn't have a bathhouse for a long time, and we received meager food rations. Only those who were strong managed to hang on. Diseases spread and people began to swell from hunger.

I was assigned to the third health category due to hunger swelling and total tooth loss, and therefore I worked as [illegible], and finally as a paramedic. During Easter 1941, Father Wilniewicz heard the confessions of a few of us and one night he celebrated mass in the bathhouse – it was the most cherished experience for me.

When I served as a paramedic, Lieutenant-Colonel Litwińczuk worked in the kitchen; he spared no effort and together we did all we could to help our friends. Some of our doctors were worse than the Soviets. They considered swelled-up, exhausted people fit for work. Such people dropped very quickly. The dead were transported away at night and buried in unmarked graves in the taiga.

In September, following the Polish-Soviet Agreement, they began to release us. I was designated to be released. Upon my release in Kotlas, my friends Jan Głębocki from Warsaw and Bolesław Ulka from Grodno were summoned to the NKVD and questioned as to whether they had known me back in civilian times. Although they were interrogated, my friends didn't tell them anything about me. In the last days of the interrogations of Poles, they chose 30 of us, together with Second Lieutenant Zaniewski, a doctor, and sent us to *koloniya* [colony] no. 6, where after a few weeks my friends began to lose heart. Seeing that [illegible], I was sent together with others to penal *koloniya* 27, where I fell ill. Taking advantage of my illness, I [illegible], where a Ukrainian doctor, who was a political prisoner, took a shine to me and kept me there until the end. All my friends, except for myself and Second Lieutenant Zaniewski, fell so gravely ill that they were sent to a recuperative *koloniya*.

On 1 February 1942 I was summoned for release. While I was receiving money for the journey, the prosecutor noticed me and saw my papers, marked with my name and surname. He snatched the papers and rushed to the NKVD chief in order to stop me, but it seems there was nothing he could do – I was released. On the same day I arrived in Kirov, where I was expected, and from there I went to Lugovoy, where I joined the 10th Division of the 27th Infantry Regiment.

I joined the Polish army on 15 March 1942.

10 March 1943