



STEFAN BIŁYK

Rifleman Stefan Biłyk, unmarried.

I was arrested on 5 March 1940 in Kosowo, on charges of membership in an anti-Bolshevik organization. I was incarcerated in prisons in Kosowo, Kołomyja, Stanisławów, Melitopol (Soviet Ukraine) and finally in Kharkiv, from where I was deported to a Gulag camp in Kotlas, from which thousands of prisoners were sent to various labor camps. The living conditions were more or less the same in all of the prisons, that is, the prisoners were treated in a barbaric way and were always hungry, and the cells were dirty and horribly cramped. For instance, the so-called single cell that was meant for one prisoner held from 8 to 12 people at a time. The prisoners were like brothers, and differed only in religious affiliation. The worst time for me was the period of the investigation, as I was thrown into prison basements that were damp and full of rats. I was summoned for *dopros* [interrogation] always at night. In order to force confessions, I was beaten and kicked in the legs, and one of the NKVD interrogators put out cigarettes against my ear. When I passed out, I had water poured down my nose, or my mouth was gagged with a handkerchief that had been soaked in water and put through a box of ashes. They had many similar methods, for example they often pretended to take someone out for an execution. Beaten prisoners received virtually no medical assistance. The Communist system was naively propagated at every opportunity, and they always demanded information that would paint Poland and Polish life in the bleakest light, or confirmation of such. They also offered freedom for denouncing members of some organization (even if false) and for working as an informer. There were cases of prisoners who had been taken for interrogation and ended their lives there. When the family found out and demanded the body, they would be given the body in a locked box and ordered to bury it without opening it.



I spent about three months in Kotlas, watching scurvy and typhoid fever murder *zaklyuchenny* [imprisoned] Poles and Russians alike. Next I was deported to Ukhta-Chibyu, where I worked at dam construction and then in *cementstroy* [a cement factory]. We worked for 10, 11, 12 or 13 hours per day, depending on the season. The conditions were horrible: we worked all day long in mud and rain, and then returned to the *zona* to sleep on bare boards in rags that were soaking wet and shoes made from car tires.

I cannot provide the number of deaths, but the mortality rate was very high due to exhaustion caused by physical labor and hunger. Apart from all these barbaric atrocities, we had to suffer the plague of the Russian *zhuliks*. These were common criminals who used to beat us, force us to perform their work, and rob us of bread and clothes, while those who offered resistance had their eyes plucked out during sleep or were even killed. The Soviet authorities turned a blind eye to this, because it concerned “Polish bloodsuckers”, as they called us.

I sent some 30 letters (which I bought in exchange for bread) to my family and friends, but I didn’t receive any answers. Next I was deported to Krutoy, where the conditions were even worse. I didn’t meet any of my companions in misery who had been arrested together with me; I was separated from the last – Mr. Grodziński from Legionowo (commander of a battalion of railway sappers in Warsaw, I don’t know his rank) – in the prison in Melitopol. I was sentenced in absentia to eight years, but in Ukhta it was changed into a life sentence.

I was released in September 1941 on the basis of the Polish-Soviet agreement. I went in an organized transport to Totskoye, where I joined the Polish army.

I would like to add that when we were informed about the release they didn’t let us go freely, but tried all possible means to make us sign up for free labor in Komi ASSR and proposed our joining the Soviet army. When we firmly demanded that they transport us to the Polish army, they even threatened us with rearrests.

Official stamp, 1 March 1943