



ROMUALD BŁAŻEWICZ

Rifleman Romuald Błażewicz, 47 years old, shoemaker, married.

On 26 April 1940 I attempted to cross the Polish-Lithuanian border, but I was caught together with my wife, son and two daughters at the border guard post. Upon arrest we were divested of all the things we had with us, including cash in the amount of 8,000 rubles, and taken to the prison in Lida. I was interrogated there several times. They would interrogate me for two–three hours, usually at night. They forced confessions by threatening me with shooting and beating.

On 2 May 1940 I was deported together with other prisoners to the prison in Baranowicze, while my wife and children remained in the prison in Lida. I was incarcerated in Baranowicze until the end of June. We were placed in a cell that used to hold twenty prisoners, but at the time it was filled with over a hundred. The hygienic conditions were very bad: the cells were dirty and stuffy, we didn't change our underwear and were plagued with lice, we had to relieve ourselves in the cell – a foul reek hung in the stifling air. I was interrogated several times in Baranowicze. The prisoners were taken for interrogation in closed cars and under guard to some office in the city. I was subjected to the same interrogation methods as previously. Before we were deported from Baranowicze, we were ordered to hand over our underwear, allegedly for washing. However, those who complied never set eyes on their underwear again. Shortly afterwards we left for Orsha, where we were taken in sealed goods wagons, 80–90 people per wagon. The journey took two days. During that time we received 500 grams of bread per day and some drinking water. In Orsha we spent one day at the station, and then we were marched under strong escort to the prison. There were many elderly and sick people among the prisoners, two people had died in the wagons and many had fallen ill – we had to carry the sick to the prison in our arms. We were taken to the prison yard in Orsha, where we were thoroughly searched. The search was conducted in the following way: everyone



was stripped naked, his clothes and shoes torn away, and all parts of the body were closely inspected, including the ears and the mouth. The search took the entire day, and then we were segregated and placed in cells, over a hundred people per cell. The cells were so small that we couldn't find a way to lie down on the floor all at once, even on our sides and with one close to the other. There were only two small windows in the cell, boarded up with mats. The "toilet" was located by the door and emptied only once a day. It was always overflowing during the day, and feces poured onto the floor. There was also a barrel in the cell that was filled with boiling water – *kipiatok* – which made the cell all the more muggy. We received food thrice a day, that is: 500 grams of bread, *kipiatok* for breakfast, some nondescript watery soup for dinner, and the same soup for supper. The interrogations continued there and were also carried out at night. When someone refused to plead guilty, he was incarcerated in a basement cell, the so-called dark cell, damp and filled with water; it was impossible to lay down in this cell, one had to stand for the whole night. Screams and groans were often issuing from there, which testifies to the fact that the prisoners were tortured there.

Some time before our departure from Orsha we were ordered to hand over all our warm clothes and coats in order to gain some space in the cells. In case of further deportation these clothes were to be immediately returned. However, we set off on our further journey with only those clothes that we were wearing at the time. Nobody got his things back.

Towards the end of July 1940 we were loaded into goods wagons, 80–100 people per wagon, and this transport was sent to Kotlas. Everyone had their sentence read out before departure: I was sentenced to eight years of forced labor in penal camps. The journey from Orsha to Kotlas took a week. After our arrival we were placed in a Gulag camp. The camp was surrounded with several rows of barbed wire, with watchtowers at the corners. The camp premises were divided into so-called *zonas* – sections separated with barbed wire. One *zona* contained barracks that could hold 400–500 people, but in fact there were up to 2,000 people there all the time, and as a result the majority of the prisoners had to sleep in the open air, without mattresses or blankets, which weren't issued to us at all. The camp in Kotlas was a transit camp from where we were sent to various labor camps. I spent three weeks in that camp. The hygienic conditions were terrible. The latrines weren't cleaned, feces weren't removed. Hundreds of people suffered from dysentery and other diseases. There was no organized medical assistance. Some people died, but the corpses were immediately taken away. The food [?] was similar to that in the prison. We didn't take any baths. The water there



stank of carbolic acid. Three weeks later we were loaded onto a barge, and the 350 of us had to stand close to one another. The composition of prisoners was varied, there were many criminals who robbed their companions in misery of their last possessions on the way. We couldn't count on any help from the guards. Four days later the barge arrived at some quay, from where we were marched off under escort for a whole day. Not everyone was able to make the journey. When someone fell to the ground out of exhaustion, he had dogs set on him, and many received nasty dog bites. After five days in the open air in [illegible] we were loaded into open wagons and transported northwards to the township of Ukhta-Chibyu. There we were divided into groups, and I was sent in a group of 50 people to Kiltov *selkhoz* [agricultural camp] in Komi ASSR. There was a sort of a farm, and we lived in barracks. There were approximately 1,500 people in that camp, and we were tasked with logging. The work quota was set at 125 square meters of ground to be logged in one day.

There were Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews in that camp. Mutual relations between the prisoners were bearable. We worked under guard in brigades numbering 20–30 people each. The food was divided into the so-called caldrons, and the quality and quantity of food depended on efficiency, or else on the percentage of the work quota met. If someone failed to fill 100 percent of the quota, he was issued only 500 grams of bread and a liter of watery soup per day. Those who met the quota received food from the second caldron: 900 grams of bread, a liter of the same soup and a serving of oat groats of average quality. Exceeding the working quota entitled one to the third caldron, which differed from the second in that the groats were served with some fat (oil).

There was a bathhouse at the site, and we used it every ten days. There was also a health facility where one could be admitted after work. Exemption from work could be obtained only in cases when someone was running a high fever. Once or twice a month we had a meeting devoted both to the duty of keeping strictly to the work schedule and to Communist propaganda.

We received letters from the country, but they were censored.

About five to six people died per month, and the deceased were taken to [illegible] woods and buried at night without any friends around. The majority of the prisoners died from exhaustion.



At the beginning of September 1941 we were informed about the signing of the Polish-Soviet agreement and the fact that under this agreement all Polish citizens were to be released. However, we weren't released that fast; a month had passed before we left the camp and went to another township, where each was issued his *udostoverenie* [certificate of release]. When we were being issued these certificates, they tried to talk us into joining the Red Army or staying for work, but none of us took any of these offers. We went to the train station and left for Totskoye, where we joined the Polish Army. We weren't assigned anywhere at that time, so I left to work in the woods in Chkalov Oblast, Buguruslansky district. I worked there until February 1942, when I left for Lugovoy, where I was admitted to the 10th Infantry Division.