



AURELIA KARCZMARCZYK

Section leader Aurelia Karczmarczyk, daughter of Jan and Marcela *née* Wójcik, born on 9 October 1905 in Oświęcim, krakowskie voivodeship. I was last the wife of a military settler in Volhynia.

On the morning of 10 February 1940, I heard a loud knocking on the window and door. It startled me terribly, as I was sleeping alone with my son; two months earlier, I had buried my husband. I opened the door and five Soviets came in. They ordered me to light a lamp and told me to get packed within forty minutes, as I was leaving for their territory. When I heard these words, I began to cry and despair. I regretted having to leave my beautiful farm, into which I had put all my effort. At the time my son had not yet turned twelve, but the poor boy tried to comfort me and implored, "Please don't cry, mommy, a time will come when we will come back to our land and cultivate it again." I sat motionless, I didn't want to take anything, but my son was packing our things and trying to reassure me. We were forbidden to go outside and talk to anyone. They allowed us to take some food, sheets, and some clothing, but the rest had to stay. And so I was taken to the municipal office, where we waited for other settler families.

At 7.00 a.m. we started for the train station. There were so many of us that it was impossible to move. I heard screaming, crying, and despairing mothers all around. For two days we spent several hours each day in closed train cars. On the third day, with tears and prayers, we set off at night for these cruel parts. After two weeks of wandering, shivering and tired, we finally reached Khristoforovo.

It was a small hamlet, composed of a few Soviet families, and surrounded by woods. We were overcome with a feeling of despair upon seeing kilometers of forest all around. They told us to get out and to go to the barrack.



It was a long, dirty, and uncomfortable building. I lived in one small room together with my son and another family of five. The room was so cramped that we often quarreled. On the third day after our arrival both my son and I had to go to work; as I didn't have any money and there was no one to work for me, I had to go earn my bread. We got a kilogram of bread per laborer and 300 grams for children. My 12-year-old son worked as a wagoner and transported timber, knee-deep in the snow. After a day's work the child was so exhausted that he would literally drop to the ground. He was smart enough to be able to cope with everything and never get tricked by others. The worst thing was that one had to work all day, and at night we were plagued by bugs and other vermin to such an extent that we couldn't sleep. We tried to exterminate them and keep everything clean and in order, but it was difficult to get rid of them.

I worked for a few months, and I received advances of 5 up to 10 rubles for my work. I had to sell my last possessions to save myself and my child. Life in the barrack was very hard for us. A sort of jealousy or hatred grew among us. Those who had more stock and money they had brought with them didn't quarrel and fight for a piece of bread. Nevertheless, we all prayed together, secretly of course, as we were forbidden to pray in a large group. I remember how in May we set up an altar for the Mother of God in the corridor and we held May devotions every evening. The authorities found out about it and one day the commandant stormed in with such a yell that we all hid, scared. He ordered us to take the picture down immediately so he would not see it again. However, we did not pay attention and continued to pray, as prayer was the only comfort we had. We would often gather in one flat and discuss politics in hushed voices. The men tried to keep our spirits up, saying that the labor and exile would soon be over, as everything would change.

The food was meager. People would stand in line for three hours and fight for a ration of oat groats seasoned with oil. We didn't see meat for months. And whenever chops were available at the canteen, they were so expensive that we couldn't afford them.

Our children would often give performances, and it was very nice to listen to our beautiful Polish poems. We were proud that our children had not forgotten our Polish tongue, and their sole entertainment was some Polish book, cherished like a treasure.

The Soviet authorities treated us harshly. The mere sight of a commandant or a policeman made our skin creep. They would often come to the barrack to make sure everyone had gone



to work and check what we were doing. When someone didn't go to work, they took revenge, in various ways. When we wanted potatoes, we had to walk a dozen or so kilometers, secretly and at night, so the commandant would not see us, as he would immediately put us in jail as punishment. They were constantly telling us that we must forget Poland, that there would never be a Poland again, and that we needed to build houses for ourselves, clear the forest and plant potatoes or do other things.

The hospitals were far away. Many of our brothers died on the way, as help arrived too late. There was one woman who was a barber surgeon, but she did not know much about medical treatment. When someone felt unwell, she would just administer aspirin and discharge him or her from work for one day. A number of people from among our settler families died there: Stanisław and Roman Świąciński – these old men literally starved to death; Zygmunt Sudkowski, a settlers' son, a 14-year-old boy who overexerted himself; Maria Wiatrowa, a settler's wife who died of blood poisoning.

I received letters from my friends who were in the country, as my family had also been deported to Kazakhstan. I felt most sorry for my mother, a 76-year-old woman, who kept sending desperate letters to me, begging for help.

On 15 August, the amnesty was announced and a few days later we left those horrible woods and went west. We travelled for two and a half months in terrible conditions. Bugs plagued us to an impossible extent. On the way I fell ill with typhus. I was taken to a hospital, where I stayed in a grave condition for four weeks. My son also contracted typhus, but he suffered complications, that is he had ear surgery and malaria. The child was in serious condition for three months. Whenever I had any money, I spent it on food for him, to enhance his recovery. I learned that young boys could enlist in the army, in the junior cadets. I got my son discharged from the hospital and walked him out like a 70-year-old man; on the way he would pass out from exhaustion. I hired a cart and drove him to Gorchakovo. Many civilians lived there in tents, impatiently waiting for some sort of ending. One day a recruitment board arrived and my son left as a junior cadet for Margilan. It took a weight off my mind: I knew that he would be alright there, that he would be looked after, and that they would make a fine man out of him. In March 1942, the army, the Women's Auxiliary Service and the junior cadets went from Margilan to Guzar. I missed the army terribly – it became quiet, there was no one to give us soup or a piece of bread. I was too weak to work, I lived from day to day,



hoping that I would join the WAS and my life would improve. After many hardships, I got to Guzar and joined the WAS. Then I began to feel well – I was no longer hungry and I was proud to wear a Polish uniform.