



MARIA CHOJECKA

Maria Chojecka, born on 11 March 1903, section volunteer, wife of a cavalry major [on permanent active duty].

After several interrogations at the militia station and three times having my place of residence changed, during which I lost almost all my belongings gathered over the course of a dozen or so years, I decided to leave illegally and go to Warsaw. I was to leave on 14 April 1940. Instead, on the memorable night of 13 April, I was woken up by the hammering of rifle butts. I realized that it was too late. When I opened the door, six Bolsheviks entered, gun in hand, and the rest stayed outside. They conducted a thorough search of the flat and gave me twenty minutes to pack my things, which they then loaded into a car and took us to the train station. We were among the first to arrive. We were kept at the station for two days, and nobody from the outside was allowed to see us. There were 34 people in our car. Hygienic and sanitary conditions were practically non-existent. Everything had to be done in the car. Diseases began to spread and the first lice appeared. At bigger stations, a doctor and a nurse would arrive and administer aspirin and valerian to all people, regardless of illness or age of the patients. We got soup once a day, always at night. We received a sufficient amount of bread.

After three weeks' journey we arrived in Pavlodar, Kazakhstan. From there, some people were transported in groups to various kolkhozes and sovkhoses, while some stayed in town. My daughter and I were taken to the Lebyazhye district, located 150 kilometers from Pavlodar. We were placed in a barn and told to find a flat. After three days' rest we went to work.

The work was very hard for women: we had to fill 80-kilogram sacks with grain and haul them several dozen meters away. We were to earn – on average – up to two rubles per day, but we didn't receive any payment for three months. We had to devise other ways to obtain bread. We got food in exchange for clothes and underwear, and thus somehow managed to get by.



We received packages from our country, and the post was delivered regularly. We couldn't establish any contact with prisoners or POWs. Our cables and letters remained unanswered.

We were summoned to the NKVD every two weeks. The first question was always the same: who my husband was and where he was at the moment. During one of the interrogations, the NKVD chief began to read out the indictment concerning my husband. He enumerated all the decorations that my husband had received, emphasizing that he had been awarded the *Virtuti Militari* for the Polish-Soviet War. Seeing that they had detailed information about my husband, I asked them for his address, or else to send him mine. I always received the same answer: "You'll learn it when the time is right". All attempts at getting in touch with my husband were to no avail. I got the last letter from him when I was still in our country. It was sent on 15 February 1940 from the POW camp in Kozelsk.

The first winter abroad was especially severe; snowstorms blocked the roads and cut us off from the world. The local populace began to starve. In the Polish colony, a congenial atmosphere prevailed and we were helping one another. However, as we were running short of stocks, we had to find a way to earn our bread. Thanks to the support of the farmers, I got the post of cook in an orphan asylum. The Kazakhs, however, didn't agree to having a Polish woman. The manager talked me into going to the NKVD chief. He didn't help me, saying that we were in Kazakhstan and therefore the Kazaks had the final say. Instead, he offered me a job as a barmaid in the canteen. Of course I accepted it. I was taken advantage of: apart from the ordinary duties of a barmaid, I had to keep the books, scrub floors and help in the kitchen. I used to leave the house when everybody was still sleeping and come back when they had already gone to bed. It was more than I could bear. However, I clung to the canteen: my daughter and I were never hungry, and – with utmost caution – I could help the Polish colony. I suffered much unpleasantness because of this. Mrs. Wiewiórska, who works as a dentist in the WAS [Women's Auxiliary Service] Backup Center, remembers me from that time. After the outbreak of the Soviet-German War, I was dismissed without notice, and what is more I was deported to a sovkhos in Bieskaragaj, located 15 kilometers away.

I was deported together with Mrs. Irena Brzozowska (a physician), her parents and little son, Eugenia Rajowska, and her daughters Stanisława and Izabela. The militiaman who escorted us reassured us that all Poles would be removed from the region. They didn't manage to do that, as a week after our deportation the amnesty for Poles was proclaimed. There were



many Polish citizens in Bieskaragaj, but the majority of them were Ukrainians, and they were hostile towards us. In Lebyazhye, all women had worked, though it wasn't compulsory, but in Bieskaragaj everyone was forced to work. We had to work in the fields and earned very little; in addition, we received 600 grams of bread per person. I bound grain into sheaves for a month. At first we lived in the field, but when the rains came we built huts for ourselves. We commenced work before sunrise and finished after sunset. We earned from one to two rubles a day. We received 800 grams of bread, *kipiatok* [hot water] in the morning, dumplings of rye flour boiled in defatted milk at noon, and either *kipiatok* or defatted milk (always burned) in the evening. We had to pay for all of this.

After a month of such work I developed a heart condition, and on the basis of a medical leave I was released from work. From that time on I worked only irregularly. There wasn't any work in the winter.

Some Germans from areas along the Volga were brought to our sovkhos, and they were the only ones that could find some employment. The winter was horrible for the Poles. Wiera Dobrowolska (the wife of a physician from Torczyn) died of hunger. Her little son was taken care of by Mrs. Irena Brzozowska. At that time my daughter had a second attack of appendicitis; a diet was out of the question, and I was overcome with despair. I decided to leave for the town at all costs, and tried to talk other ladies into it. But when the critical moment came, none of them went.

It was absolutely impossible to leave legally. I bribed some driver and we left in a truck filled with empty petrol barrels, although the temperature fell to 45 degrees below zero. I cannot believe to this day that we didn't freeze to death or fall out of the truck; it was a miracle. In Pavlodar the driver dumped the load in the street; what next? I didn't know any address, so I stopped every passer-by, asking for help, but people just walked by indifferently. A Kazakh who was passing by in a vehicle gave in to the temptation of getting some tea, but as soon as we set off, a friend from the sovkhos, Janka Grudzińska (her father, a reserve lieutenant, works in Quizil-Ribat in the Office for the Care of Families), turned up and without asking any questions, told the man some address and we drove off. To the end of my days I won't forget the heart-warming welcome Mrs. Olga Grudzińska gave us. We were never hungry again.



In town, the assistance of the Delegation was felt at every step. Cavalry Captain Kazimierz Świącicki was responsible for military matters, and Stanisław Likendorf (currently a lieutenant in the 12th Uhlan Regiment) took care of civilian issues. I told them about the situation of the Poles in the countryside hamlets, but they were powerless: there were no means of communication etc. They planned to run a large-scale aid campaign in the spring. I don't know whether they implemented these plans.

I left for the south. Colonel Szafranowski had sent a train car that was to take Stanisława Strzemińska (both of them are from the 6th Division), Podolska, who was the wife of a captain, and other families. They took me and my daughter as well; we were taken care of by a reserve platoon leader, Franciszek Gregorczyk, to whom I owe a lot. Our journey lasted three weeks, and then we arrived in Kitab. Colonel Szafranowski took care of us there, and provided us with foodstuffs from the mess. The place felt like paradise. We hadn't managed to get any rest before we had to set off again. All requests were to no avail; the colonel ordered us to go. When I think of it today, I am truly moved and grateful. On the day when the train cars came the square was filled with a crowd of Poles. I had witnessed much misery in Russia, but what I saw defied imagination. Some people were nothing but skin and bone, and several of them died in the square. The transport consisted of soldiers, some soldiers' families, and landowners. The transport was led by Colonel Jaxa-Rožen, and Lieutenant Witold Kotowski was his deputy.

A few days later we arrived in Krasnovodsk. A huge crowd had already been waiting there for the ships. When the luggage had been loaded onto the ship, an NKVD chief read out the surnames and people boarded the ship in groups. At the last moment I found out that the list with our names had gone missing. Colonel Jaxa-Rožen gestured helplessly, saying that he couldn't help at the moment. We were able to leave thanks to the energetic efforts of Lieutenant Kotowski.

We spent a few hours in Pahlavi and then went to Tehran. I left Tehran for Palestine with the first group of cadets. In Habbaniya, I waited for over three weeks for a transport. On 1 June 1942 I arrived in Palestine as a private person. Thanks to the help of Lieutenant-Colonel Kolbuszewski, a chief of the 1st Unit, I put my daughter in a secondary school in Tel Aviv, while I myself joined the army.



The following people were with me: Mrs. Kazimiera Studzińska with daughters Sława (a physician) and Halina, Mrs. Janina Tyleżyńska with son Władysław, Wanda Benklewska with her mother and children – Danuta and Jurek, Natalia Piotrowska, Maria Chrzastowska, Genowefa Denis with her little son Stanisław, born already in Siberia, Jadwiga Białkowska with her little daughters, Barbara and Halinka who was born in a train car, Danuta Zarembina with daughter Irena, Czarnecka with daughter Halina, Halina Klisowska, Kinowa with daughter Irena and son Jerzy, Brennensstuhl with his son, Beiner with his wife and daughter, Irena Brzozowska with her little son Juliusz.

The following people remained in Bieskaragaj: Mrs. Maria Wałęcka with her son Jerzy (she was the wife of Major Zygmunt, commandant of a District Draft Office), Anna Marienstein with her son Andrzej (she was the wife of a dentist, a reserve lieutenant).

Many other people stayed there as well, but at the moment I cannot recall their surnames. Maria Dybczyńska (a captain's wife), who stayed with her son and daughter, was destitute.