

TEODOR MICHALAK

Lance Corporal (Rifleman) Teodor Michalak, aged 38, married, factory worker

[I was] called up on 30 August 1939 into the 44th Infantry Regiment in Równe [now Rivne, Ukraine]; after 20 days, together with the whole reserve battalion under the command of Major Gołąb, I found myself in Łuck [now Lutsk, Ukraine], where we were taken into Soviet captivity.

Of course, that memorable day of 19 September marked a radical change in my life. This is because that date was the beginning of wandering from place to place between various labor camps, a time of intense communist propaganda as well as moral and physical suffering.

After a brief stay in the Russian territory (Shepetovka [now Shepetivka, Ukraine]), where we were brought for a very short time, we returned on foot to the Polish territory, to Zdołbunów [now Zdolbuniv, Ukraine], and then went on to Dubno. We were quartered in the building of a hop-processing plant, and the whole burden of supplying us with provisions rested with the local population, who organized a campaign on their own initiative in order to save the prisoners of war from starvation. After spending nearly two weeks in Dubno, we found ourselves in Verby, where they started using us for roadworks, digging ditches, logging, etc. Our living quarters were the buildings of the local lumber mill, strongly guarded by Soviet *boitsy* [soldiers]. Two "rooms" could accommodate 1,200 people on four-decker bunks. We were fed twice a day with soup, and the rations of bread varied depending on the stocks. The sanitary conditions were horrible, there was no doctor at all. We were rushed to work at gunpoint.

The previous group of captives had been taken to Radziwiłłów [now Radyvyliv, Ukraine], where they were still put to work at building the freeway from Novograd-Volynskyi [now Novohrad-Volynskyi, Ukraine] to Przemyśl.

From that moment, normal work began according to Soviet regulations: with quotas for all kinds of work, raised to the highest limits. Food in that period was very poor and grossly

inadequate to the work we performed. I would like to stress here that there were those among us who – having taken the posts of foremen – became outright mercenary renegades and exploited their companions in misery more than the Soviet despots did. Add to this the shortage of water in the Radziwiłłów camp, and you can imagine the hygienic and sanitary conditions.

Regarding the campaign of “raising communist political awareness,” it was systematically carried out by political officers called politruks; it must be said that the campaign did influence some group of the prisoners, though only a small one. This obviously caused a number of quarrels between true citizens of our country and these degenerate scoundrels. Good relations with them were out of the question. But in the group of people who retained their Polish spirit despite intense agitation and physical persecution, the mutual relations were warm and friendly.

We remained in the Radziwiłłów camp until 16 May 1940. From there, we were transported to the village of Rodatycze [now Rodatychi, Ukraine], where we were quartered in the outbuildings of a Franciscan convent. We stayed there for three weeks, and then we were transferred to the camp in Gródek Jagielloński [now Horodok, Ukraine]. Objectively, it should be said that the living conditions in this camp – food, accommodation, and hygiene – were adequate. This was particularly thanks to the camp’s commandant, Surkov, who was fair and honest with people.

We returned from that camp to Rodatycze in July and remained there until February 1941. In Rodatycze we celebrated Christmas, in a cheerful and merry mood, with an orchestra that consisted of two prisoners of war, and with the invited Soviet authorities, who looked approvingly at the fact of celebration being held this time, despite its purely religious character.

It should be stressed here that the first Christmas in captivity, in Radziwiłłów, had been celebrated in sorrow and tears, and the Soviet authorities reacted by destroying and trampling the Christmas trees we prepared.

The next stage of our journey was Janów [now Ivaniv], near Lwów. This camp meant a deterioration of living conditions, both in terms of sanitation and in terms of accommodation, as well as supplies. As a result, numerous protests took place here,

involving refusal to take any food. Then we were transferred to Skniłów, near Lwów [now Sknily, Ukraine], where we were put to work for the construction of a concrete airfield. The living conditions were horrible; the buildings were unheated and wooden, and you walked nearly waist-deep in mud. In this camp, I was put in solitary confinement, without food, for tearing a newspaper with a photograph of the Soviet cabinet and using it to roll cigarettes. The sanitary conditions were appalling.

The German–Soviet war broke out. The following day we were gathered and set out towards the Soviet border. We marched 800 kilometers on foot in 24 days to the town of Zlotolesh [Zolotonosha?]. This period was the worst in the whole painful ordeal we had been through. People fell down due to fatigue and exhaustion caused by hunger. Those who lagged behind were killed, had dogs set on [them], etc. We marched 22 hours a day and rested wherever we found ourselves when night came – we slept under the open sky. A two-kilogram loaf of bread was the food for 16 people, and we were not allowed to drink water at all. After spending one day in Zolotonosha, we were transported as far as Poltava, where we stayed a week in conditions so dreadful that a lot of people fell seriously ill and were sent to local kolkhozes [collective-owned farms].

From Poltava, we departed for Starobelsk. Already on the way there we heard rumors about a Polish–Soviet pact and the Polish Army being organized, but no one wanted to believe these rumors. On 1 August 1941 in Starobelsk, all the prisoners of war were assembled and a Soviet dignitary read out the Russian text of the Polish–Soviet pact [the Sikorski–Mayski Agreement of 30 July 1941], which was then translated into Polish. That was a very touching moment, when the assembled people sang “Poland Is Not Yet Lost” [the first words in the lyrics of “Mazurek Dąbrowskiego,” the Polish national anthem] and “Boże coś Polskę...” [“God Save Poland,” a solemn patriotic song and prayer for the nation]. We felt that our link with the motherland was strong and indissoluble; we understood that the moment of our liberation from captivity was near, and that we would be part of the Polish Army that was in the making.

From that time, we were not taken to do any work, except when you volunteered to do it, and the food and sanitary conditions improved considerably. Still, we had to wait until 24 August, when Lieutenant Colonel Wiśniowski arrived and set about organizing us into an army. On 3 September 1941, we left for Totsk [Totskoye], and this is when we started regular work in the ranks of the Polish Army.