

## CZESŁAW POLEK

### Personal data (name, surname, rank, age, occupation, marital status):

Czesław Jan Polek, rifleman, aged 34, municipal board accountant, unmarried.

### Date and circumstances of arrest:

I was arrested in Mosty Wielkie on the night of 11/12 May 1940 because of a false confession obtained from Antoni Piszczak, a bricklayer from Mosty Wielkie. He was arrested on 9 May 1940 and was beaten during his interrogation. Along with me they also arrested the retired accountant of the 6th Regiment of Mounted Rifles in Żółkiew – Marian Bronisław Zaleski – as well as Jan Tokarz (a teacher), Józef Janusz (a barber), a chimney sweep surnamed Michałowicz, and Czesław Martynowski (a confectioner). Charge: participation in a Polish armed organization. After a monthlong investigation conducted at the Mosty Wielkie jail, I was transferred to the so-called Brygidki prison in Lwów, at Leona Sapiehy Street, and in Zamarstynów. In each of those places the investigation was opened and closed with the same result. We all stood accused of violating sections 54.2, 54.11 and 54.13 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code. The first two charges referred to organized activity and were dropped for all of us during the last interrogation session, whereas 54.13 referred to anti-communist activity undertaken still within Polish territory and was kept on the record. They could not get me to admit to this charge despite sophisticated nighttime torture sessions, so after a yearlong investigation they finally deported me without a trial or court sentence. On 11 June 1941, I was sent to Vorkuta camp no. 1, also known as Kapitalnaya.

### Name of the camp (prison – forced labor site):

Vorkuta camp no. 1 (Kapitalnaya).

### Description of the camp or prison (grounds, buildings, housing conditions, hygiene):

The camp was divided into three zones: the old, the new and the small one. The small zone was the most awful since it housed the worst common criminals. Political prisoners would also be sent there for a few days at a time, mostly as punishment for failing to meet their daily work quotas. Upon entering the zone, the new arrival promptly received a crowbar

blow to the back of the head, landed on the ground unconscious and was robbed of all possessions – including clothing buttons if his clothes were shabby enough. If they were decent, he lost them too and awoke in some rags instead. Besides that, he would be beaten to force him to exceed the labor quota and earn a ration of food from the fifth, sixth or even seventh cauldron, but he would never see any of that food: the foreman would give this ticket to a pal of his and his pal's fist cauldron or even punishment food ticket to the unfortunate man.

**The composition of POWs, prisoners, exiles (nationality, category of crimes, intellectual and moral standing, mutual relations, etc.):**

Prisoners serving time for common crimes had the most rights and were given all the internal oversight positions in the camp. Most USSR nationalities were represented, so one met Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Lithuanians, Romanians, Russians, Uzbeks, Tartars, etc. Most of the prisoners were Poles, Lithuanians and Romanians from lands recently annexed by Russia. The prisoners' intellectual level was difficult to gauge because no one had the energy for any particularly smart thoughts, not even members of the intelligentsia. Everyone's thoughts concerned mostly their stomachs: the stomachs did all the thinking and talking. Relations were awfully bad on account of the work regimen. The prisoners were spurred on to work harder not just by the *naryadchik* [work brigade supervising prisoner], leader of ten and the foreman – rank and file prisoners would pressure each other too. They would not let each other rest for even a while, shouting, "You want me to do the work for you?!" As a result of this communal pressure, they could do triple the work assigned for the day, which soon led to the actual quota being tripled and consequently becoming extremely hard to meet.

**Life in the camp or prison (daily routine, work conditions, quotas, wages, food, clothing, social and cultural life, etc.):**

Work went on day and night, irrespective of the weather. By the time the night brigades returned, the day ones were already out working. We worked 12 to 14 hours a day. We had three or four hours of sleep a night, because much of the time outside of work was spent on getting to the work site and back (7 kilometers one way), roll-call attendance, *proverka* [inspection], and obtaining our meals. Food was issued twice a day: before we left for work and after we returned. We would take all our clothes off only once a month – when we were assigned time in the bathhouse. Usually, after we returned from work, ate our food, and

got through the *proverka*, we would just fling ourselves on bare cots in our wet clothes and immediately fall deeply asleep, unconcerned with the lice and other insects we were infested with. The next day, we would be awoken by the shrill, wild shouting of the *naryadchik*: "Podyom!" [Wake up!] If that were not enough for someone, they would get a sharp kick with a hobnailed boot to drive the point home. So, one got up, grabbed a bowl, and ran to get soup, so they could wolf it down before heading off to work. If anyone was late and didn't grab their food on time, they'd have to go to work hungry and likely also cold, wet and barefoot. There was no time for any cultural activities. No one attended the local cinema because that would be squandering valuable sleep time to watch a movie dripping with communist propaganda.

**The NKVD's attitude towards Poles (interrogation methods, torture and other forms of punishment, Communist propaganda, information about Poland, etc.):**

We had no contact with NKVD authorities in the camp. Only once were we assembled and addressed by the camp overseer – after the signing of the Polish-Soviet agreement. He told us that our work was important to the common cause, that we had to put even more energy and strength into it, and that anyone caught avoiding work would be considered a saboteur of the common cause and punished accordingly. He also told us: "Your labor is as vital as frontline combat. There will come a time when you too will go and join us in fighting the fascists, but then you will be fighting not for the Poland of yesteryear – as it had once been – but for a free Soviet Poland."

**Medical assistance, hospitals, mortality rate (provide the names of the deceased):**

Some of the prisoners were appointed camp doctors. They would not give out sick leave because they did not want to be punished. That had happened. For example, a Pole known as Dr. Russo had issued a larger number of sick leave permissions and he was transferred to do manual labor, even though the people he granted leave to were legitimately sick. Hospitals lacked medical supplies and equipment.

**Was there any possibility to get in contact with one's country and family?**

There was no contact.

**When were you released and how did you manage to join the army?**

On 11 September 1941, I was released from the camp in a group of 30 Poles. We were given permission to reside in Buzuluk, where the Polish Army was forming. However, for unknown reasons, we were not accepted there and were sent further on to Chardzhou, which lies on the Amu Darya River, then transferred to barges and sent to Kongrad, where we were assigned to various local kolkhozes. We were called on again to join the army in November 1941 – over 4,000 people went on this new journey, on four barges, from Kongrad to Turtkul. This 340-kilometer journey took 17 days and cost 71 lives, as people died from the attendant hunger, exhaustion and cold. After landing in Turtkul, we waited until March 1942, when the ice on the river melted enough to enable further travel. I was finally drafted into the 7th Infantry Division on 25 March 1942 in Kermine.