

BOLESŁAW ROŻEK

I arrived in Russia as [illegible] of the Soviet army. By November 1940, I was already a member of the Sverdlovsk communications battalion. There were only two Poles in my company – the other troops were Ukrainian and Russian.

While we were in the army, the Bolsheviks did their best to make us forget about Poland and the past. They forbade us to speak of the past and most especially prohibited any such conversations with Russian troops. While in service, I was very cautious because I knew I was surrounded by snitches. My colleague, Ż.M., was much more friendly and talkative so he drew the attention of the NKVD and had to visit them quite often. They attempted to recruit him, i.e., have him sign a document that would make him an NKVD member.

The food in the army was acceptable but life was hard and monotonous.

Thus, I lived until the outbreak of the German-Soviet war. When it broke out, the authorities pulled all the Poles from the frontlines – seeing them as potentially disloyal – and put them in labor battalions. I was assigned to one such battalion that was transferred to Ural and used for various tasks.

At first, I worked at an airfield. The work was generally light – eight hours a day – and the food was decent. That lasted only a month, as our work was reorganized, and we were transferred to an aluminum factory located between Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk. There, I met not only Poles but also Estonians and Germans. And life got hard: I was an earthworks laborer and worked 12 hours a day without any days off.

The living conditions were horrible; I lived in a hovel we had built ourselves. The food got worse day by day. Work seemed more and more grueling – eventually even walking would tire us out. We started getting cases of infectious diseases and saw our first deaths. Bad hygiene compounded the health problems: access to the bathhouse was very infrequent and a change of underwear was issued only once a month. We had tattered clothes and had to wrap our legs in rags. We moved sluggishly and were almost lifeless husks; by this point none could meet the labor quota. The battalion commander, of Russian nationality, assembled us for an address more and more often, trying to get us to work harder. His approach

fluctuated: sometimes he would threaten us with the death penalty, then switch to appealing to our patriotic feelings, saying that we Poles should work all the harder now that we are an allied nation, and that the planes we were making would also serve the Polish Army (which was being organized in the USSR).

Many of my colleagues wanted to escape that place and some succeeded – they are now members of the Polish Army. I eventually took advantage of a short period of sick leave and ran away from the UAZ (the name of the factory) on 10 February 1942. I traveled to Chelyabinsk, where the Polish authorities facilitated my further journey to the Polish Army.