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In 1940 I was forcibly drafted into the Russian army. Senior soldiers and my superiors were quite friendly at first, but this warmth did not last long. Both food and clothing were adequate. Disciplinary measures were drastic – one could be court-martialed for the slightest infraction and a few of my fellow soldiers actually experienced that firsthand. Speaking Polish was not prohibited except for hours spent on post; while on post, one was required to speak Russian.

Then came 1941. After the signing of the Polish-Soviet agreement, I was pulled from frontline service in the Smolensk area and sent to an assembly point. There, we gave up our weapons and a political commissar read information about the agreement to all the Poles. We were very glad to hear the news and believed that we would soon see Polish uniforms. We were sent away to Gorky; it was claimed that the Polish Army would form up there but that was a lie – Gorky was not the site of Polish Army recruitment but of a construction labor column. People from all parts of Russia had been conscripted into this column and now, under false pretenses from the Soviet authorities, so were we. In the column, we worked and lived in difficult conditions. Around December 1941 we were sent to do special earthworks labor: we dug ditches in inclement weather, including temperatures as low as minus 50 degrees. I had returned my boots earlier because they were military-issued and was now wearing slippers, so I developed frostbite on my toes. Our work was measured by quota fulfillment: those who met the quota received 600 grams of bread a day, while those who did not got 200 grams. Besides all these difficulties one also had to resign oneself to being eaten alive by lice, since we were given bathhouse access only once every two months.

I distinctly remember the day of 11 January 1942 because that was when I was really released from the labor column, handed over to the local Polish delegation and sent to Uzbekistan. There, after a long and arduous journey, I joined the Polish Army.