

JÓZEF LENC

Cannoneer Józef Lenc, born on 19 March 1924 in Jadwigin, Czaruków county, Łucki district, Volhynia voivodeship.

Until 12 April 1940, I went to the former Tadeusz Kosciuszko state secondary school in Łuck, later renamed as a Polish secondary school. I lived with my sister, whose husband, Reserve Lieutenant Edward Herba, was arrested in the first days after the Red Army entered the region.

On 13 April at 3:00 a.m., along with my older brother, sister, nephew and others, we were ordered by the NKVD authorities to get into trucks after they had conducted a search. The Soviet authorities limited the time we had to pack our things to 30 minutes.

While we were packing, there were militiamen (Soviet police) who allowed us to take the following items: bed linen, a few changes of underwear, clothing limited to two changes, crockery, one pair of footwear, food for seven days and other items such as gloves, a scarf, socks etc. The total amount of the luggage was between 4–6 boxes per person. Then we were escorted to Łuck station, where we boarded some freight wagons. The wagons were covered in dirt and smelt of cattle manure. The windows of the wagons were boarded up with planks, with bolted doors at which a guard stood from the special escort divisions at each stop.

The conditions we endured during the journey were dreadful, we were terribly crushed in the wagons because there were around 40 people with luggage. After a few days of travel, we began to suffer from the lack of sanitary assistance. As they travelled, some people fell ill, mostly with a stomach sickness. There were several dozen deaths during the transport, mainly among the children and the elderly. During the stops, food was brought by the local people, who were pushed back while the more stubborn ones were grabbed and then these people would suffer some heavy blows dealt by the rifle butt of the guard standing next to the wagon. And that is not the end! Despite the beating and having to hear disgusting words about Poland and themselves, they were thrown into wagons, where their personal freedom ended. Such incidents took place in Russian-occupied Poland.

And so in constant hunger, because we only had about two buckets of hot water (*kipyatok*) and a bucket or two of soup per day, we rode 15 days to the city of Pavlodar. The next morning [after arrival], the railway siding at Pavlodar was filled with police authorities who hurled abuse at us and handled us brutally. We were unloaded from the wagons, from where we went to a ferry. We were transported by ferry to the other side of the Irtysh River. We spent the 1st and 2nd of May on a meadow by the aforementioned river. Cold, damp and hunger ravaged everyone present. We also buried an elderly woman there. Finally, on the evening of 2 May, some trucks and camels arrived. We loaded ourselves up, some of us into the trucks, and the rest onto the one- and two-humped camels.

The place where we were destined to work was in such a deplorable state that it was hard to imagine. There were three incomplete barracks made from plywood, and nothing else. 1,200 deportees were herded into them. They were mostly school kids and high school students, officials and wealthier landowners from Poland. Those for whom there was no room slept under the open sky or made shacks from their own sheets and any sticks they could gather. The village was bereft of flora and fauna, because tufts of steppe grass grew only here and there. It was earmarked for a project to build a power station (LE) 25 km from the nearest town of Maykainzoloto and 135 km from Pavlodar. We arrived there along the road on 3 May.

The next morning, the others and myself were called to work. There were also women with children from the age of 14. Each of us was given a shovel, a pickaxe and a heavy iron bar that was difficult to lift. One or two so-called squadron leaders selected from among the Kyrgyz and Russians, were assigned to each group, who were tasked with designating workplaces, recording the number of hours worked, checking the presence of each person on a daily basis, and recording the work done by a given brigade. During the first month, my colleagues—mostly high school students along with a group of women— and I worked in quarries in very bad conditions. Namely, the mine was not safe to work in, the work tools were inadequate, and we had large quotas and terrible heat with wind up to 50 degrees. One person had to extract 5 m³ of stone per day during eight hours of work. A few people suffered severe injuries due to the collapse of the stone wall, which happened more than a few times. A worker's average monthly earnings amounted to 90 rubles, which made it difficult to buy even one pair of boots.

After a month, the whole group (brigade) was moved on to earthworks. One day, when digging the foundation under the baths, I—along with my colleague Florian Pacholski—was accused by brigadier Pavel Mielnik (a Ukrainian) of alleged sabotage and was sent for 2 weeks of forced labour making concrete in a brickyard (*kirzavod*), five kilometers from where I was living. After serving my sentence, I was assigned, along with my friend, to the rubble workers, who loaded trucks with heavy building materials, such as beams, cement, stone, bricks, iron, sand, lime, etc. I worked as a rubble worker until an agreement was signed between Poland and the Soviet Union.

We did not have a local doctor or a hospital. The hospital was 25 km away. Hospital food, along with the service associated with it, was fit for dogs. The knowledge possessed by the doctors and midwives noticeably had little in common with medicine. This is evident from the fact that so many deportees died—more than one hundred crosses sprung up on the empty space overgrown with grass. This misfortune befell children under 12 and the elderly.

Each employee had a ration book, which he could use to pick up bread and produce brought to the local store. One worker could take one kilogram of bread per day, while each month we each received a kilo of sugar, three kilograms of millet (rice, groats and pearl barley) and some small items like cigarettes, sweets, biscuits and sewing utensils.

Throughout the entire time, until the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, I received three letters from my family who carried on farming in Nieświcz, Łuck district. In general, correspondence from Poland was scant, because most of the letters were liquidated by the Soviet censors. The NKVD police authorities as well as the local population of Kazakhs and Russians were unfavorably inclined towards the Poles, which resulted in mass arrests among the Polish youth. Among others, Józef Ornowski, a student at a secondary school in Łuck, left his mother and two sisters aged 12 and 14. Chajowa, Skrabińska and Tkaczowa—the constables' wives, left three children, the oldest of whom was 10 years old, and the Poles took care of them. Stefan Dowgierd, a student at the Warsaw School of Economics, left his sister and mother. Wic, a sergeant in the Polish Army, left a sick wife and son aged 12. Władysława Mazurkowa, wife of a second lieutenant of the reserve remaining in German captivity. The total number of arrested persons exceeded 40 people. I do not recall their names, nor do I know the reasons for their arrest.

Interrogations carried out by the NKVD usually took place at night, at 11:00 or 12:00 p.m. Whoever was to be interrogated would enter a room where several NKVD men were sitting together with the governor. First you would be asked about your nationality, occupation and what you had been doing recently in Poland. Then, the tone became less friendly and the questions switched to what news you had received from the homeland and other suspects. Whenever the one being interrogated did not respond in favor of Soviet Russia, appropriate reprisals were applied, such as putting a pistol to your head, punching the table and insulting the Polish state, Poles and the Catholic faith along with the Holy Father and God. At the time when the Polish-Soviet agreement came into force, relations and material conditions did not improve, quite the reverse—they worsened, because as a train driver at the Nayzatas gold factory, during the winter period neither I nor my brother, sister or any other families received a kilo of bread. In exchange, I received 15 kg of wheat, which we cooked like millet.

This is how I spent this time with almost all my family and other deportees in the USSR. Finally, the moment we had all been waiting for came— a journey to join the ranks of the Polish army. On 17 March 1942, I joined the Polish Army in Lugovoy, leaving my sister and nephew at the mercy of man and God.