

Memories from Deportation to Kazakhstan

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by **Stefania Borstowa**

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In the effect of the secret protocol of Ribbentrop-Molotov non-aggression pact Poland was invaded from the West by Nazi Germany and later from the East by Soviet Russia in September 1939. German attack to Poland on September 1st 1939 is also considered the beginning of the World War II. Although the attack by Germany was anticipated, the Soviet invasion (September 17) caught Poland and the Western world as a surprise. The invasion of Poland from both sides concluded a fourth partition of Poland. The Soviet invasion was followed by massive involuntary deportations of Polish population, especially so called "social enemies" to the East.



This operation was done by NKVD and involved about 1 million people. The women and children were sent usually to the remote settlements to the Siberia or Kazakhstan, the men were sent to labor camps where they worked in inhuman conditions, many died. The memoirs presented here depict very well the fate of these people on the example of one family.

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Since 1938 Stefania with her husband, Edward Borst and their two children lived in Stanislawow, in Southeastern part of Poland. Edward Borst came from an influential family of textile manufacturers from Zgierz (Lodz area) He was a Polish officer of the reserve. In 1939 his military unit was caught by Soviets during the attempt to cross to Romania after the Soviet invasion. Edward Borst was sent to a forced labor camp in Komi republic and died on dysentery.

April 13, 1940 - Friday, 11 pm. Pounding on the entrance door. Marysia (home servant) asks "Who" - the reply: "NKVD" (state security). Marysia runs to the bedroom: "Dear Madame, they've come to take us. Please, escape with the children through the window, I'll keep them on hold for a while." I refused to try to escape. I immediately realized the potential future - two small children with no clothes, no money, no food and a very limited number of friends where I could safely hide. Could we have any chance to succeed or would we endanger the lives of others? Everybody is responsible for his own life. I replied: "Marysia, please let them in". Three men came, all in uniforms and armed, with revolvers in their hands. They came to the bedroom where my children slept: Andrzej, three years old and Tereska, eight.

"Get dressed, do not wake up the children"- commanded one of them. Oh, good man, do not wake up the children! Strange, but I felt a wave of warmth in my heart. He discreetly turned away when I was getting dressed. Marysia dressed in the kitchen under the guard of another man. We were not afraid. We were as calm as ice. They ordered us to sit next to each other. One of the men stayed with us and ordered the other two men to leave. After a couple of hours, I wanted to smoke a cigarette; he offered his own but I did not want it. They let me bring my own cigarettes but he followed me and Marysia into the room. Another problem - I had to go to the restroom. He followed me there and did not allow me to close the door. About 5 am, two other men came back. We learned that they had arranged a truck to pick us up about 8 am. They ordered us to pack things up; we prepared 18 suitcases and bags. I was lucky, I asked the son of the neighbors to run to the friends' house with the information that I do not have money, bread or any extra food. Here is the text of the letter I sent to them: "I beg you, help us, give us as much money as you can. They are taking us to Russia, goodbye dear friends". The friend came back with the boy. She brought a loaf of bread and 10 golden French francs sewed inside the belt.

April 14, Saturday: They took us to the railway station at about 10 am. Our train was on the side rail track. The luggage was put into a separate wagon. They allowed us to take with us only the most necessary things. In the freight car (for animals) sixty people were squeezed. People of different sexes and ages- a two-year-old girl was the youngest, a 65-year-old woman was the oldest. These were mainly the families of policemen, prison guards, doctors, lawyers and reserve officers. All of Saturday, we waited for departure. People wanted to drink and they still had bread to eat. They did not let us leave the carriages. In the streets behind the wired fences, there were crowds of people bidding farewell. The guard watches next to the train. I see just in front of the wired fence the artesian well. I ask: "who will give me the bucket; I will bring the water". I got the bucket, jumped off the wagon, and the armed soldiers ran into me. You are not allowed - I try to argue to no avail. I was very upset - in the carriages children were crying; they wanted a drink. I approached the soldier and I told him - be a man, let me go, otherwise I will cut you through the head with this bucket. He let me take the water and the crowd on the street is cheering. I was able to fill up four buckets, since we did not have more.

The first night in the carrier, we took the upper bed - three alongside in the bed and the youngest - my three-year-old son on the top across us. Turning to the other side was almost impossible. On Sunday at 10 am, the train moved out. It carried away about 2 thousand people, mainly women and children.

We did not know each other but there was no animosity or a lack of trust between the passengers. Through the whole journey, we were not allowed out of the wagons. At the stops, Polish railway workers were sharing their food with us; in fields, the Ukrainian people were selling us milk, cooked potatoes, sometimes dry

crackers or lepyoshkas (cakes made of flour, yeast and water). We were hungry and there was not enough water. We had to get organized. With an ax, we cut a hole in the floor and surrounded it with some cloth - this was our restroom. We broke the bars in four wagon windows to see the world around us. We were travelling mainly through the steppes, sometimes through some poor villages.

The first big town was Tula. The train stopped there for a couple of hours. Two officers were walking on the platform. We asked them to help us find water. They laughed at us: "maybe your God will help you" - One of the women said - let's pray - we knelt down and prayed to St. Mary for water, all of us prayed. Even the small crying children begged God for water and something strange happened. The sunny sky gets darker. A sudden shower starts. We stick out the pots and cups to catch some water. St. Mary won and we could not even tell it to the officers, since they were hiding in the railway station from the rain. During the journey, which lasted two weeks, we could not change our clothes or take a shower or even wash. In spite of that, we did not get any cloth worms.

All of us were very saddened by a tragedy. A wife of the reserve officer was with us. Her husband was able to escape to London. Her younger son, 15 years old, was able to escape from transport while we were loaded to the trains. The younger son, 5 years old, was with his mother. The mother was very worried about her older son, she was very nervous. One night, somebody noticed that she was trying to suffocate her younger son. He was safe but kept away from her until the end of the journey.

The route of our journey led through Stanislavov, Vinnica, Poltava, Charkov, Tula, Ufa, Chelabinsk, Lubiaza. We left the train on April 19, 1940 in Lubiaza. We spent a night on the railway platform searching for the luggage and some food, in the rain. The next day we were loaded into the trucks and distributed around Kazakhstan. Two trucks loaded with luggage and thirty people stopped in a village Krutoyark about 120 km from Lubiaza. Rain again, small streets, a square. In the morning the villagers came to see us. They were touching our coats, cloths and shoes. They wondered about everything. It was like a real comedy.

The representative of the kolkhoz (kolkhoz is a Soviet type of collective farming) came in and ordered the residents to take us to their houses. The old fisherman with a long beard liked Jedrek, my son and he took us to his house. The old fisherman's house was a large wooden house, with a kitchen, with one large room, with three windows and with a real floor (many houses did not really have a floor) made of wooden boards. A calf was kept in the kitchen and also the chickens were kept there under the bench. A big oven took over a half of the kitchen. The oven served for cooking of the variety of foods. The most popular food there were so called lepyoshki (lepyoushki is a type of bread made of flour, yeast and water). The oven was also used as a bed for sleeping. The room was very nice and very clean. The huge bed had a pile of pillows, two big chests next to the wall, one table,

two chairs. At the windows there were curtains and many flowers. This was a house of the richest man in the village.

Olga, his wife, was not a good person, but she was very obedient to her husband. She gave us the room but took away all the pillows. She left only the straw mattress. She fed us and gave us the sage tea. After we unpacked the suitcases we went to see the rest of our group. We realized also, that we lost the suitcase with all the clothes of my husband (Soviets soldiers specifically asked me to take my husband's clothes). The big box with medicines was also lost.

Generally, the houses were not in bad shape. In Krutoyarka there were twenty wooden houses, built before the October Revolution and about 30 mud houses (earth houses). A wooden school building was situated in the middle of the village. It had large rooms for five classes and a teacher's room. There was a big square in the village with granaries and a small store. But there was no civilization there. There were beautiful old icons in every house. The icons were mainly of the Madonna and St. George (Yurij). They were kept in the corners of the rooms and in the kitchen. Before leaving the house, the residents always made the sign of cross and bowed in front of the icons.

After a couple of days all adults were ordered to work in the kolkhoz. This was a time of plowing and then the haymaking. The establishment of the kolkhoz was very upset that we - Poles after a long argument won a right not to work on Sundays nor during the holidays.

It was difficult to buy anything for money. We had to exchange some of our cloths to buy some bedsheets. In the beginning almost all newcomers were living a comfortable life. Many Poles were buying all the food they could, even sour cream, butter or ice-cream. We were one of the few who decided to live frugally since the beginning and this was a good decision. In May we asked for a plot of yard to grow potatoes. We received a hundred square meters of a very hard soil. I and Marysia had to cut the soil with a knife and ax before we were able to loosen it. To buy potatoes we had to walk with a wheelbarrow to a village 30 km away. People in nearby villages did not even know what potatoes were.

After doing so much hard soil-digging work I got an infection in my hand, eventually it evolved in the strep-like acute infection (erysipelas). I had a high fever and a huge edema under my armpit. Marysia had to cut it, it looked terrible but it healed eventually. Just when I started feeling better my daughter Tereska got sick. She had a high fever. First I thought that this was the flu but when I was combing her hair I realized that she had hard nodules all over her head. We called the doctor but he said that he could not come earlier than in two days. I was in despair feeling the hopelessness of this situation. When I was coming back home after seeing the doctor I began crying. Then my crying changed into an attack of hysteria. I sat on the grass sobbing loudly. Suddenly I remembered the words of mother Zakrzewska

"you should not cry when something does not go according to your will. The cry weakens our will and feelings. We should trust in God and Holy Mary. They would never abandon you, they would always help". This was my last cry during our stay in Kazakhstan...

A doctor came in two days. The children were just eating breakfast - cocoa milk with sugar and bread with marmalade. The doctor stated that the food is too fattening and this was the cause of the hard nodules on the head. He was wrong of course. The tick's eggs were under the head skin of Tereska. I spent three days to remove it. I had to do it with the razor blade, I did not have any disinfectants but we avoided any further infections. This doctor studied medicine for six months and was responsible for the hospital with 30 beds. He had just two nurses to help. In June 1940 our host-fisherman went to visit his daughter to the village 60 km distant. After a couple of days we learned that he died on the way. His wife went ballistic. After we came back home with four buckets of wild strawberries picked up in the forest we saw our belongings thrown outside of the home. We were homeless again

From the letter to the family in Poland:

“Every week we steam in the banya, a sauna. This is a real show. The temperatures in the sauna reach 55 C and one has to be really healthy to stand it! We enter the sauna after the local people, the Kazakhs) and this makes it a bit cooler for us Poles.

Not everybody in the village has a banya. Only rich and thrifty farmers own one. So the invitation to the banya shows respect or friendship. Banya is a turf building about two meters high and three meters long. It has an oven made of bricks and clay in one corner. There is iron ribbing along the walls. Usually all sorts of scrap iron and bricks are heaped on the top of the oven to sustain the heat.

A fire is lit in the oven. Near the oven there are containers of water - barrels, buckets, pots - whatever is available. The water heats up from the heat in the oven; the coal smoke is vented out the oven door that is slightly open to outside. Near the walls lie the plank beds made of birch trunks. Every person has his own birch switch. The switch is made of young branches of the birch tree which are cut during the late Spring. Their branches are bound together in a big knot and heated in water. After heating in the water the birch leaves became greener and softer. When not being used for the sauna, they are stored in a dry place in the loft of the house.

When the iron piled on the oven is red and the fire is stabilized with no coal smoke, the temperature in the banya is finally right for people to enter. All take off their clothes and, completely naked, enter the banya. Everybody comes together - men, women, and children.

They sit on the straw covered planks or on the floor. The water is poured onto the hot iron producing a lot of hot steam. After about 15-20 minutes we take our birch

switches and whip our bodies and the bodies of our neighbors top to toe, back and front. There is no soap to use, they rub their bodies only with a wood ash or potash.

Children are whipped and washed first since they cannot stand such a hot temperature for very long. After the sauna children run home completely naked whatever the weather and temperatures are outside. They do it even if it is very cold and a hard freeze (-40 C) and a snow 1 meter high. At home children have their cleaned clothes waiting. After they dress they lie beside stove to warm up and rest."

I realized that during the six winters we spent there, I did not recall any child with even a mild cold. In spite of the fact that the distance from the banya to the house was often more than 100 meters (300 feet).

When the children are gone, the adults still keep on whipping each other. All try to clean the backs and heads really well. Then the men leave put on their clothes outside only women remain in the sauna. When only women remain the real fun begins. There is lots of chatting, gossiping, laughing, crying, like in a cafe, just the coffee cups are missing. Local ladies were able to sit there up to two hours, only sporadically pouring more water on the hot iron to produce more steam and heat. All women were really jolly and happy."

What is interesting, during this communal washings - there were no jokes or gestures of any sexual nature. We really liked these baths, and we used it with great enjoyment through all our stay in Kazakhstan.

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