

MIECZYSLAW GIGIERA MY ARREST AND THE GULAG



Mietek, 1942 - age 21

From 17 September 1939 the 'repressed people' came under Soviet rule and suffered in Soviet prisons, gulags, labour camps, collective farms and exile. I was a repressed person who had done nothing wrong. I was sent to the gulags for hard labour and I suffered.

I came from a small village just north of Luboml in what was Poland but is now in north west Ukraine, in Volyn, the Kresy area. I was sent to a prison in Minsk. It was common practice for a trial to be held without the accused being present to defend themselves. This was an administration task to sentence you, even though you had done nothing wrong. I was sentenced to a term in Siberia. This was for 5 years. They sent me to Sevzheldorlag, a penal labour Gulag camp, doing railroad construction. I would have been just 18 years old at this time.

Sevzheldorlag Northern Rail ITL was a penal labour camp of the gulag system in the USSR. The full name was Northern Railway Corrective Labour Camp of NKVD. The main operation was railroad construction. The sites of the camp were within Komi ASSR, It is now the town of Yemva.

This is not a period in my life that I like to recall. The work was hard manual labour. The food we received was poor in quality and quantity. The conditions we lived in were inhumane. There was much illness caused by malnutrition and lack of sanitation. I was a young fit man and fared better than some of the older men.

Whilst we were undergoing our own personal hell in Siberia, the war in Europe was getting going. The megalomaniacs Hitler and Stalin had invaded Poland. They both had big ambitions. Hitlers ambition even went as far as to invade Russia, the country he had previously struck a deal with, to share Poland between them. On June 22 1941 Hitler and Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. This proved to be our salvation, although some might think, 'Out of the chip pan and into the fire'.

At this point Russia and the Nazi's became enemies and resulted in Russia changing her allegiances and thus, joined the allies. A consequence of this was that many people, although not all of them, were released from the gulags in Siberia. This was called an amnesty. The men were released to fight a war against Nazi Germany. The women and children were going with them to escape Siberia.

I was lucky to be released. We now had to make the long journey out of Siberia. Trains were put on for us. My brother was at the same time making a similar journey from the north west of Siberia. He was sentenced to a 5 year hard labour term in a forestry gulag. He had escaped from there. By a most fortunate chance we bumped into each other on one of the train journeys. We were very pleased to see each other alive. I was with a group and he was alone. After some time we separated, but joyfully, found each other again after the war.

TEHRAN-MY TESTIMONY

Following the amnesty and our release from hard labour in the gulags, we had made the long and difficult journey from the gulags to Tehran where we were going to enlist to fight the war in Europe.

In Tehran in August 1942 a Documentation Office was set up to take statements from those who had been through the Soviet prisons and gulag camps to record the horrific experiences we had suffered and witnessed. The hand written text below is my testimony, given at this time, in my own words.

Polish Forces
 Państwo Nr 583. T. W. O. 6350
 Jan Gigiera Mieczysław rok urodzenia 1921 w Włodzimierzu

Byłem wywieziony z rodziną w marcu 1940 r. W drodze
 do Mińska odłączyli mnie od rodziny i zabrali do
 więzienia jako "konterewolucjonier". Przy badaniach
 śledczych zostałem bity każdorazowo. Następnie
 byłem wywieziony do łagru do Koźwy i gdzie
 po upływie kilku tygodni wyczytali mi wyrok
 zaoczny 5 lat.

Pewnego dnia przy pracy zachorował
 kolega mój na robocie Jan Sobczyk 1919 r.
 i prosił wartownika o odstawienie go do obozu,
 otrzymał odpowiedź, trzeba pracować - dosyć
 tej symulacji, oczywiście nie otrzymując
 żadnej pomocy lekarskiej do wieczora kolega
 mój zmarł.

W tym samym obozie pewnego dnia o godz. 12 w
 podszedł kolega mój Goładzka Józef nieco
 bliżej do żony i nie uprzedzając przez wartownika
 został od razu zastrzelony.

Jan Gigiera Mieczysław

The poignant handwritten document above says:

Gigiera Mieczysław rok urodzenia 1921 w Włodzimierzu. Byłem wywieziony z rodziną w marcu 1940 roku. W drodze w Mińsku odłączyli mnie od rodziny i zabrali do więzienia jako "konterewolucjonier"

Przy badaniach śledczych zostałem bity każdorazowo. Następnie byłem wywieziony do łagru do Koźwy i gdzie po upływie kilku tygodni wyczytali mi wyrok zaoczny 5 lat.

Pewnego dnia przy pracy zachorował kolega mój na robocie Jan Sobczyk 1919 r. i prosił wartownika o odstawienie go do obozu,

otrzymał odpowiedź : trzeba pracować - dosyć tej symulacji, oczywiście nie otrzymując żadnej pomocy lekarskiej do wieczora mój kolega zmarł. W tym samym obozie pewnego dnia o godz. 12 w południe podszedł kolega mój Goładzka Józef nieco bliżej do żony i nie uprzedzając przez wartownika został od razu zastrzelony.

It roughly translates to:

Gigiera Mieczysław was born in 1921 in Włodzimierz. I was taken away from my family in March 1940. On the way to Minsk, did they separate me from my family and take me to prison as a "counter-revolutionary". During my investigations I was beaten every time. Then I was taken to the concentration camp in Koźwy and where after a few weeks they read me a default judgement of 5 years. One day at work, my colleague Jan Sobczyk fell ill at work and asked the sentry to return him to the camp, he got the answer: you have to work - enough of this slacking. Of course, without receiving any medical help until the evening my colleague died. In the same camp one day at 12 noon my colleague Józef Goładzka approached his wife a little closer and was shot without warning by the guard.

Being in the gulag was a bad time in my life. It was slave labour. The things I witnessed and experienced were horrendous, like the investigation which really means torture where I was beaten until I agreed to the accusation of being a 'counter revolutionary' and was subsequently sentenced to 5 years. In the gulag it was total domination by fear, suppression and inadequate food, clothing, warmth and care. I witnessed the brutal death of two men, but I also witnessed so much more and the only way to survive was to keep your head down and silently comply with the brutality.

We were the unfortunate people to be born in the wrong place at the wrong point in history and we paid the price at the hands of a brutal regime brought about by the megalomaniacs, Hitler and Stalin.

1. Nazwisko i imię GIGIERA MIECZYŚLAW KAN Nr. 6350/32
2. Rok urodzenia 1921 3. Narodowość 4. Wyznanie 5. Zawód
6. Miejsce stałego zamieszkania w Polsce
7. Miejsce ostatniego pobytu w Polsce: a) na wolności
b) po pozbawieniu wolności
8. Przyczyna opuszczenia Polski ZŁAZIENIE NIETIEN'
9. Data pozbawienia wolności MARZEC 1940 10. Data opuszczenia Polski
11. Miejsca pobytu w ZSRR przed amnestią :
a) obozy jęciów
b) więzienia MINSK
c) obozy pracy KOZWA - SIEWZELDORŁAG
d) postelki
e) inne miejsca pobytu 12. Data zwolnienia
13. Miejsca pobytu w ZSRR po amnestii
14. Zatrudnienie w ZSRR : a) w obozie jęciów
b) w obozie pracy
c) w postelkach
d) w innych miejscach pracy

ARCHIWUM PAŃSTWOWE

RECRUITMENT TO THE ARMY

Following my arrest in late 1939, sentence to a Siberian gulag, release and journey to join the army:

14/01/1942 I joined the Polish army in the USSR and was posted to 9 Infantry Division.
01/04/1942 After crossing the Russo-Persian border with my unit, we came under British command in the Middle East. We were taken by ship across the Caspian Sea, both the recruits and escaping civilians, to Persia (now Iran). The ships were full in order to get as many military and civilian people away as possible. There was a feeling of relief to get away. In Persia there was food and shelter. People could be happier. Whilst we were recovering from the gulag starvation and rebuilding our strength we underwent training for war. I served in the Middle East; Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt. The Polish Army became known as 2nd Polish Corps, part of the 8th British Army. It consisted of 2 Divisions; The 5th Kresowa Infantry Division and The 3rd Carpathian Rifle

We were eventually shipped to southern Italy, all the time we were training to ready ourselves for a war that we needed to win to restore us to our country and to gain freedom. We moved north towards the fighting. I fought alongside my fellow countrymen and once again experienced and saw things that I would sooner not recall and prefer to leave in the past, except to say many men were dreadfully wounded or were killed in action. As units became depleted of fighting men we were moved around to make the numbers up for the next battle.

My postings included:

14.01.1942	9 Infantry division
08.12.1942	8 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment
01.11.1943	16 Supply Company.
31.12.1943	3 Anti-Aircraft Regiment
06.06.1944	2 Rifle Battalion

10.04.1945 **I was wounded in action.**

I was patched up and recovered from my wounds and remained in Italy until the end of the war. During my time in Italy I met my 'wife to be', Lucyna Perekowna. She already had a son, Bogdan from a previous relationship. We were married in Italy and I formally adopted Bogden, before being sent to England in the autumn of 1946. I was reunited with my brother, Mark Gigiera in Scotland where we both ended up. We had both survived the war although he had been badly wounded by shrapnel. We shared our war experiences. We could not return to our homeland as we would have been arrested for a second time and returned to the gulags as traitors. My wife had family who had gone to Buenos Aires, Argentina, so we headed there to join them. That is where we settled with Bogdan, and Janek, our second son.

After the war I did not discuss my experiences with my family. I found it very difficult and distressing to recall the horrors. Many of us suffered afterwards as well as during the war and the horrendous things we went through. Today this would be called PTSD, post trauma distress syndrome. At the time there was no name for this and we were just expected to get on with it and with our lives. There was much work to be done and so it was all hidden under the carpet and on we went.

