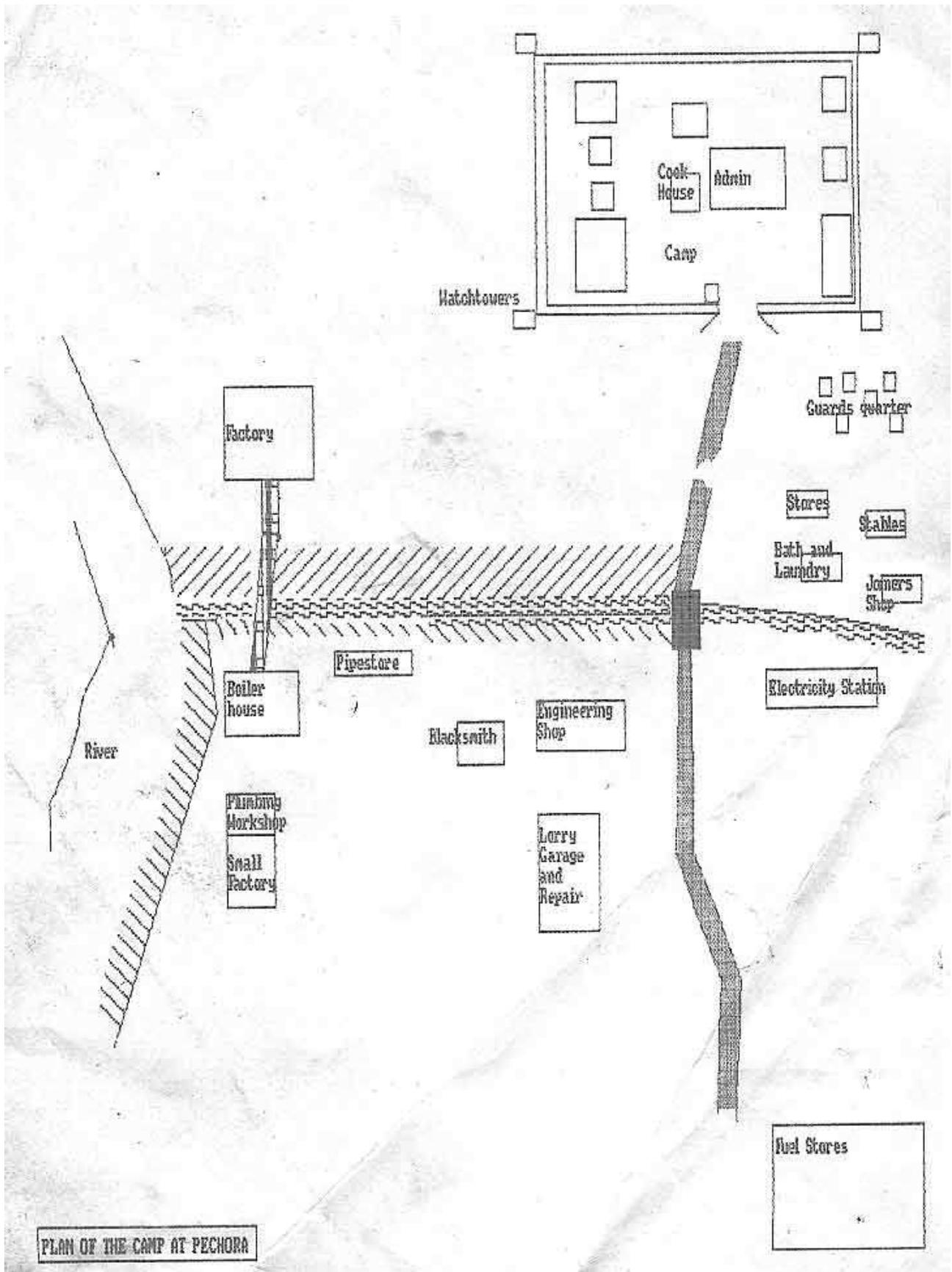


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A Pole who threw logs at God

Autobiography by

Marian Jan Krupa

CHAPTER 1

The first time I cheated death was before I was one year old. I was a weak and puny child from birth and so when I caught the highly infectious and usually fatal disease, smallpox, I was not expected to survive. That I am alive today is in no small measure due to the constant and selfless care given by my maternal grandmother. No doubt my mother, who was only a young woman at that time, was under a great deal of anxiety and emotional stress and was grateful for someone else to take charge. My grandmother was determined that I should recover. No one could have been more devoted in her endeavours or more selfless in their care. She bathed me constantly day and night in a solution containing camomile flowers until the disease passed. That I have today no visible scarring is, I am sure, due to this unorthodox treatment that she painstakingly discharged. Of course, I remember nothing of my illness. I report only what I was told by my parents later.

I was born in the city of Krakow in Poland on the 10th of April 1922. If my birth had been reported in the local newspaper it would have read,
"To Bartholomew and Anna, a son, Marian Jan. A brother for Tony."

Poland's social and economic conditions at that time were austere. The country had just negotiated independence after fighting in the First World War and was struggling to build up its shattered economy. Poland's war did not end in 1918, but continued until 1921 and recovery from the ravages of war was only in an embryonic state. In the peace talks with Russia the Polish leaders had accepted new frontiers in a compromise situation. The new Poland became a multi-national state consisting of Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Germans, Byelorussians, Lithuanians and Tartars. The integration of all these nationalities, with their differing languages and customs would pose social problems for quite some time to come. With a predominantly agricultural economy that was fairly primitive, the country had the lowest national income per head in Europe. Money was scarce. Food was even scarcer.

During the previous thousand years Poland's borders changed many times. The country had been a buffer state at the mercy of Germany on its west and Russia on its east. Both powers wanted the land upon which Poland stood and Poland in its turn had wanted land from them. Many of Poland's troubles had occurred because of its leadership, which caused infighting and indecision and because of its lack of natural borders such as rivers, mountain ranges or coastlines. The USSR had taken lands on the east and won back in differing proportions as had land on the west by the Germans. One of Poland's mistakes could have been not giving its peasantry in the border areas a sense of nationality and pride, thereby making them easy targets for a conquering neighbour. Very few of the peasants there spoke the Polish language.

Krakow was from eleventh to seventeenth century Poland's Capital city. In comparison with British cities it is slightly larger than York. It also has a similar heritage - a beautiful cathedral containing precious and famous artefacts, Wawel castle and museum, and city walls. The Krakow University dates back over

six centuries and there are many beautiful buildings of great architecture, some of which house important art treasures and antiquities. The university boasts some famous sons - Copernicus 'the man who made the sun stop and the earth move' and many celebrated professors in astronomy and mathematics. Legend has it that Dr. Faustus the great German magician studied there.

With market places, arcades, green parks and winding streets, it is a city of contrasts. Although mainly rural in character, there is also some heavy industry. The city is virtually split in half by the river Vistula, a long navigable river, on which can be seen barges transporting goods weaving in and out of pleasure boats. The Gas Board, the Electricity Board and many small businesses border this river. The social activities of young and old are drawn to its banks. Five bridges, four taking roads and one taking the railway connect the two halves of the city.

There is a legend that alleges that, 'A dragon lived in the town and demanded all the most beautiful virgins to eat. The populace lived in fear of this dragon (none more so, I suspect, than the virgins). In true chivalrous manner, various knights attempted to fight the dragon, but they all failed and were killed by the monster. The dragon continued to terrorise the city and the townspeople were becoming desperate. Who would save their daughters from this insatiable beast? Then one inhabitant named Krak came up with an idea. He would stuff a dead sheep with sulphur and feed it to the monster. The townspeople were sceptical but they had nothing to lose and decided to give it a try. The dead sheep was obtained, stuffed with the sulphur and placed near the dragon's lair. From a safe distance they waited and watched. They held their breath when the dragon appeared and approached the hostile lure. To their great joy, the dragon ate the prepared meal. The sulphur gave it a terrible thirst. It drank water from the River Vistula until it exploded into 1,000 pieces. The dragon was dead! The

townspeople were so proud of their hero Krak that they named the town after him - Krakow'.

A yearly ceremony is held on the Vistula to commemorate another event relating to the same dragon.

'Princess Wanda, rather than acquiesce to a German prince who wanted to marry her just so that he could take over Poland for Germany, threw herself into the River Vistula from the ramparts of Wawel Castle at the mouth of the dragon's cave and perished'. Every year the townspeople remember this event. They walk in procession to the riverbank and throw wreaths incorporating lighted candles and flowers on the river.

Every year during the summer the town celebrates the 'Lajkonik', a very interesting diversion, a tradition based on folklore. A tradesman from the district gets dressed up as a Tartar in brightly coloured costume, tall pointed hat topped with a crescent shaped emblem and Cossack style boots. He sports a long black flowing beard, a black moustache and a long black plait, and at his side is a long curved sword. In his hand he brandishes an imitation mace stuffed with straw - an awesome looking weapon but relatively harmless. He rides a white hobbyhorse also bedecked in brightly embroidered vestment and proudly bearing an array of white plumes on top of its head leading a procession of local people dressed in colourful national costumes around the town. There are dancers, roundabouts, stalls, floats etc. In fact everything you expect to see with any large, important pageant. People flock from all the surrounding villages to join in this spectacular festival. The Tartar on the hobbyhorse is heralded by drums and whistles. The local children taunt him by dancing around him and trying to get in his way. He in turn tries to scare them off by threatening to smite them with his mace. It is a time of music, singing, dancing, laughter and merriment.

The ceremony celebrates the repulse of the Tartars who invaded Krakow in the thirteenth century. A Krakovian boatman, together with some of his friends, successfully drove back the Tartar invasion, forcing the invaders to retreat outside the city walls. The citizens returned triumphantly riding the Tartars horses and wearing the Tartars clothes - the spoils of their victory. The day of the 'Lajkonik' has such importance that it is a public holiday in Krakow.

A more sombre tradition exists relating to the same Tartar invasion. A bugler tried to warn the Krakow citizens of the impending violation of their city walls by playing a tune from his high vantage point in the tower of St. Mary's Church. Before he could finish the tune he was prematurely silenced by the arrows of the Tartars and died with the bugle still caressing his lips. The remembrance of his action lives on every day in the city. Every hour on the hour four short bugle calls are sounded from the tower of St. Mary's Church - one towards the south, one towards the west, one towards the north and one towards the east - all of them ending suddenly and poignantly on an abrupt high note. Polish radio also broadcasts the bugle call as a time signal at noon every day of the year.

This Church of St. Mary is unusual in that it has two unequal spires. These also are the subjects of a legend. The story is told that two brothers were building the spires. Each brother started building a spire and there was great rivalry between him. They argued about the size of the spires each claiming that their own spire was proceeding faster than the other. Even when the spires were completed the arguments continued. Each brother insisting that his spire was taller than his brothers. The pointless quarrels grew and grew, neither brother willing to back down, until they reached such a magnitude that a very serious fight ensued. During this fight one of the brothers was killed. The townspeople were aware of these quarrels and could see no reason for them, as both

spires looked the same. However, the day after this fight to the death they were astonished to see that the murdered brother's spire had miraculously grown appreciably bigger than his assassin's.

There are many festivals and celebrations in Poland throughout the year. Sad to say, most of them commemorate wars and political events rather than religious ones.

CHAPTER 2

After April 1922 there were 6 people (mother, father, maternal grandmother, paternal uncle, older brother Tony and myself) living in one cramped room situated in Podgurze, which is a suburb of Krakow, within 1000 yards of the River Vistula. We moved out of this accommodation before I was three years old and I remember very little about its interior make up. All I do know is that all six of us lived, ate and slept in that one room.

My father was short and stocky - a typical Polish peasant - and was a hard-working man, who was very good around the house. He had been brought up on a farm and had very little schooling. My paternal grandmother still worked the farm along with my father's sister, my grandfather having died of excessive use and abuse of alcohol some time before I was born. In spite of his lack of a formal education my father was a good listener and he had educated himself well in all the necessary subjects. He was a non-aggressive, but firm disciplinarian - a man who was very careful with his money. There was no frittering his hard-earned cash on drink or tobacco or any unnecessary expenditure. His penny pinching was his way of trying to ensure that he, his wife and children had better opportunities and to raise their social standing within the community. Ready-made clothes were luxuries and as such were very rarely bought. He would go to market to buy fents of material and it was he who would sit down at the old treadle Singer sewing machine and make our shirts and trousers. He did the bulk of the food shopping, mainly because he knew the cuts of meat and the shopkeepers knew they could not fool him. He was also a good cook and would often prepare Sunday dinner for the family.

An extremely industrious and patriotic Pole, his job was labourer, working in the coking plant at the local authority run Gas works. The coal would arrive by train. It was then loaded into hoppers, which were hoisted by cranes and emptied into the plant. My father, together with other labourers, would then shovel any coal spillage into the mouth of the plant. It was very hot and exhausting work. Not only did the heat affect the labourers, but also the fumes which exuded from the works. Being good employers, and obeying the health and safety regulations then in force, regular breaks were allowed during the working day. Even my father, a very healthy man who rarely fell sick enough to miss work, fainted in this heat on a few occasions. He also suffered from the odd one or two nosebleeds at this time. The Gas Works were situated near the centre of the city, adjacent to the River Vistula, and every day but Sunday my father would walk to and from there, taking with him his meagre lunch packed up in a tin box. He would leave the house sometimes early in the morning, sometimes during the afternoon, sometimes at night, depending on what shift had been assigned, dressed with his regulation Gas Board overalls over his oldest clothes.

When I was small one of my most vivid memories is of my father, once a week, setting off in the evening to walk the 30 kilometres to his mother's farm to fetch food. The vegetables my grandmother was able to spare him stretched the money he had available for feeding his growing family. If he was lucky, he might get a lift on a horse and cart returning from Krakow market and travelling back to the village, the farmer having sold his produce. He was well known in both areas and was also well respected. After staying a short while chatting with his mother and sister, he would take his leave and set off to walk the gruelling 30 kilometres back. The return journey would be much harder as he would be carrying a sack full of fresh vegetables, fruit, cheese and butter, and he would arrive home the next

morning just in time to don his overalls and set off to work. It is only when we mature and reach the adult state that we are able to truly appreciate some of the sacrifices willingly made for us by our parents.

My mother was a very sympathetic person. She was pretty, slim, petite and delicate. I owe my physique more to her genes than to my fathers'. In contrast to my father's peasant background, she was directly related to the aristocracy (long since bankrupted), her maiden name being Bartnicki. Although the new generation of Poles had contempt for the gentry, who they felt had contributed to the country's historical disasters, my mother always considered that by marrying a Polish peasant she had married beneath her station. However, her family name was the only claim to fame as her family was even poorer than my father's and my maternal grandfather (long since dead) had been a shoemaker and a drunkard. She was no better educated, although she had a more aggressive personality than my father. In spite of this she was the one to whom we youngsters would go for comfort when we had fallen and hurt ourselves or had been chastised by father. Often she would shield us from father's anger by covering up our misdeeds, although if he found out about it his wrath would be turned upon her. This wrath would be verbal. I never saw my father lift his hand to strike my mother.

She was a hardworking woman and with the primitive cooking equipment it could take her all morning to light the stove, get it up to the required temperature, and cook the main meals. An extremely religious person, she could often be found singing hymns and counting her rosary as she went about her housework. She would attend church on all Sundays and Holy days accompanied by we occasionally unwilling offspring. There were always religious statues and pictures around the place. If she had any money to spare, she would buy books on the lives of the saints, or other religious artefacts, much to the disgust of my

father, not because of his indifferent attitudes towards organised religion, but because he felt the money had been spent frivolously.

Although I have few recollections of our living quarters at that time, I do remember that we always had animals around - dogs (crossbreeds), cats and sometimes rabbits. The dogs were for guarding and although they roamed around the house during the day, at night their sleeping quarters were outside in a large kennel. The cats had no real purpose other than companionship and looking decorative. The rabbits were for breeding, fattening up, and eventually the cooking pot.

The incidents which I recall about those early years are few but fairly vivid.

I remember the River Vistula overflowing and flooding the streets around. There was some sort of scaffolding erected so that people could walk above the floodwater. To a child, even a walk down the street, although frightening, was a big adventure at this time and we sailed our makeshift boats on this 'sea' without having to leave our own street.

The area we lived in was the working class, poorer area. The houses were mainly single storey, built round a small courtyard. Each house would accommodate many families each having a single room. Some occupants not only lived in one room but also conducted businesses such as tailoring and shoe making within that same room. A communal entrance led to corridors from where these individual living quarters had their one and only door. It was a very noisy and busy place with more than its fair share of opportunities for gossip and neighbourliness. The outside door led straight on to the pavement and the street, which was made up of crushed and rolled gravel. Consequently in rainy weather there was mud everywhere. The communal corridors had to be cleaned by the residents and many a youngster received a clip round the ear for his part in soiling any newly scrubbed passageway. Traffic passing by the house was mainly horses and carts that

tended to churn up the road surface. Even the hearse was horse drawn. It was a great event if any motorised vehicle passed up or down the street.

None of the houses in our street had running water. A hydrant was situated at the end of the street, which served several streets round about. We were lucky to have our water supply so near at hand. Others had to walk the distance of several streets. The residents had to come and fill their buckets here whenever they required water, often several times a day. It was inevitable that the water hydrant served as a focal point for neighbours to meet and discuss the local gossip. There was no need of a newspaper to disseminate the local events when there was this much-frequented hub available. The hydrant was also a magnet for all the local children who would love to press the handle and see the water gushing out. This fascination for water never seemed to extend to neck washing. In this Polish children are no different to children the world over. There was no drainage at the site and in winter the area round about became a skating rink - more enjoyment for the local youngsters. Inevitably, in winter the hydrant froze. Inhabitants had to use melted snow and ice for their washing and cooking until the water board workers came to unfreeze the pipes. Fires were lit around the iron structure that eventually melted the ice in the pipes and the water flowed once more. Not only skating rinks but bonfires too.

There was a tanning factory nearby and some of the apprentices used to lodge in even poorer quarters than ours was across the street. Their houses were old, broken down and often derelict. The windows, if they were not missing altogether were cracked and grimy, affording little opportunity for seeing either out or in. Doors hung forlornly on lopsided hinges and swung back and forth in the strong breeze. However, most apprentices couldn't afford to be choosy. They all had other priorities. Their presence in the area made it a rough district, especially at

weekends when these youths spent their pay in the local public house, and fighting, usually with knives, was the normal Saturday night activity. People stayed indoors when the apprentices staggered home after their night of carousing.

Just around the corner were the larger houses of the rich. The inhabitants of one house must have been very rich as they had a car. We children used to look in wonderment at this car. It did not matter to us that it was an old car. We would often watch the owners as they tried to start it with its handle. More often than not they would have to push the car to start it. We youngsters considered that these people must be very rich and it was quite an adventure to creep to the edge of their territory and watch them at 'play'. If they saw us poorer peasants, scruffy and ragged, they would chase us away, but we were made of sterner stuff. Undaunted we would return to wonder at how the other half lived. At home I would take hold of one of my mother's pan lids and brmm brmm around the house pretending that I was driving a car or a bus and that I was also very rich.

An old shoemaker, who lived alone in the basement of a two-storey building round the corner from where we lived, hung himself. In those days a suicide could not be buried in hallowed ground and I can remember there being quite a fuss made. It was the main topic of conversation at the water pump, in the corridors and the street. No-body knew why he had taken his own life, everybody speculated. I had been told that the devil would come and take his soul to hell, so I used to go along with other brave but curious children to peer into his now empty basement window. What we expected to see I do not know - maybe the devil. If so my going there must have been an act of bravado. On the day of his funeral there was a very strong wind blowing and I was told that this was the wind that the devil made when he was taking the shoemaker's soul away. I believed this implicitly and was vaguely

fearful of strong winds for some years thereafter. Oh, the innocence of childhood.

During this period my uncle left our apartment after some sort of disagreement with my father. It must have been fairly serious as his name was not mentioned after this and his whereabouts were only rumoured. My grandmother also left to live with my Uncle Tony's family who had just acquired their own property, but there was no mystery about this and relations remained friendly. One of the reasons may be that my mother was again pregnant and the family was growing. My brother Joseph was born when I was in my second year. There were now three young boys in the family.

CHAPTER 3

When I was about 3 years old conditions improved when my father was promoted to a supervisory position in the works. This was a reward for his conscientious work and, I suspect, he was also well liked by his supervisors. The family were allocated a Gas Board flat in a new development at Dombie that was a more outlying rural suburb of Krakow. This was a more select area away from the rougher elements of the more urban properties. The only neighbours were market gardeners. There was a small railway station nearby which was a great attraction to the children. The River Biaucha, which is a small tributary of the River Vistula, was only the distance of a large field away - a far pleasanter and safer place for a young family to grow up.

The complex of flats had two storeys with attic flats making a third storey in the centre of the building. There were cellars half above and half below ground under the whole building. There were two front communal entrances with corridors to six individual flats, two on each of three floors. There were also entrances at each gable end of the building to a further four flats, two to the right of ours and two to the left. Our flat was very roomy and comfortable compared to our previous apartment. It had four rooms (two living and two bedrooms) and an inside toilet. However, we still had to bath in a wooden tub, manually filled and emptied by bucket. There was no electricity or gas within the complex - lighting was by paraffin lamp and coal was the fuel used for cooking and heating. There was running water of a sort. An artesian well was situated in the grounds and water was pumped up into storage tanks. The tenants had to take it in turns to do the pumping once a week. No more skating round the water hydrant. A tap above a sink was much less exiting than a pump in the street. I could have the best of both worlds as my cousins still lived in the Podgurze area. We would visit fairly

often. Cellars, which could be used for storage, were allotted to each of the new flats.

Carriage of our furniture and chattels from Podgurze to Dombie (a distance of about 4 km) was carried out by a local man who owned a horse and cart. As we had all lived in only one room there wasn't a great deal of furniture to take to the new flat, but nevertheless my father would follow the cart on each of its journeys to make sure that any removable items were not stolen during transit. The removal took all day.

In our new flat we had a carpet on the floor in the main large bedroom where the whole family slept, but everywhere else had bare floorboards. (Eventually father had these stained and varnished.) Good, solid, second hand furniture was bought and the place, which was always kept neat and tidy, became a home. In the bedroom were two big beds - one in which my parents slept and one in which all three children slept.

Alfons was born shortly after we moved into this flat. My mother then went out to work at a tobacco factory to supplement our income, so we needed a servant who could look after us children (four lively young boys, Tony, myself Joseph and Alfons) and to help with the housework. At first my father employed local girls as nannies but none were considered very satisfactory - one neglected her duties and chased after the local young men of the village and another one was suspected of stealing. Both were dismissed. Eventually one of my father's sisters was employed. He had three sisters and one brother. Stanislaw, who lived on the farm with her husband and my grandmother; Anna, who was unmarried and had two children and normally worked as a servant for rich Jewish families in the area; Josephine, who was the youngest. Sometimes it was Josephine who looked after us, occasionally, between employments, it was Anna. It was Anna who always fell into disastrous relationships, with layabouts and drunkards. She was never without a job for

long as she was an excellent cook, especially in Jewish cuisine. Josephine, being younger, was our favourite.

I started school at the age of five. The school, which was a fairly old but nice building with good-sized playing grounds, was about ten minutes walk away from where we lived - not very different from junior schools in England with classes of around 30 children. There were desks and chairs provided but all other equipment such as textbooks, reading and writing books and stationery had to be purchased by parents at the beginning of each of the seven years of compulsory schooling. Many of these items could be bought at the school, both new and second hand, with the school taking a share of the profits. During my first two years at school a slate was used for writing on, but by the third year this was replaced by paper and pencil. Slates could be used time and time again and were relatively cheap and the progression to paper and pencils added extra expense for our parents and were not to be used frivolously or wastefully. School started at 8 a.m. with the caretaker ringing a large hand bell outside the school door. Every lesson lasted an hour and to mark these periods the caretaker would ring a fixed bell in one of the school's central corridors. This bell was activated by a handle, which he pulled down and which was locked away from mischievous hands inside a box fixed to the wall. The final bell was rung at 1 p.m.

I was reasonably happy at this school and I had a quick if stubbornly adventurous mind. I found very little difficulty in achieving pretty good grades which were required to progress to the next standard. Children who didn't meet the required grades were obliged to spend another year in the same class. Corporal punishment was usual in most schools and I had my fair share of the cane, standing in corners or dodging the blackboard eraser. I was very little different from any of the other youngsters attending school at that time.

Most of the time after school was spent with friends, fishing, swimming in the nearby river, kite flying, playing conkers, palestra, buttons or football. All our pursuits were outdoors. Flats and houses were convenient places only to eat and sleep. There were few amusements and very little space indoors. Inside meant washing hands and faces, keeping well in with the adults, doing as you were told, not making too much noise. Washing was all right as long as you had collected enough dirt to warrant it.

We couldn't afford a leather football. None of my pals came from wealthy families. Our ball was home made. Of old socks. We scrounged as many worn out socks as we could from parents, relatives and friends and these were compressed and sewn together in a sphere until it resembled the size of a football. It was a pretty solid affair and absolutely useless in wet weather but it served us well, gradually becoming more and more tattered, until it's final disintegrating demise. We then had to start again collecting socks and cajole my mother into doing the sewing required to make another one.

The game of palestra also had makeshift implements. Half a broom handle was acquired together with a smaller piece of wood about 5 or 6 inches long. A small indentation was made in the ground for this smaller piece of wood to be placed at an angle of about 45°. One player used the broom handle to strike this smaller piece (palestra), making it jump up in the air. Whilst the palestra was in the air it had to be struck by the broom handle with the greatest force to make the 'missile' travel as far as possible. The batsman then placed the 'bat' on the ground and his companion would pick up the 'missile' and throw it towards the 'bat'. If he succeeded in hitting the 'bat' with the palestra he won the point. Turns were taken in being the batter and the fielder.

Buttons scrounged from mother's sewing box were used for flicking against a wall. The game entailed trying to touch or land on someone else's button, which would then be claimed as yours.

If you managed to get some really flat, smooth buttons, these could be used as tiddleywinks.

Our kites were also home made. Willow twigs tied together in a cross with string would be covered with any paper we could find. The tail consisted of a length of string with pieces of newspaper tied like bows at intervals. They were crude and didn't fly very well but the enjoyment was in the making more than the flying.

I often wonder whether, these days, children derive the same amount of fun from their ready-made toys and sports equipment as we did from our crude home made affairs. I doubt it.

There were many fortifications and bunkers around the area left from the Austrian occupation and we children used to play in these fixing up makeshift tents and playing army games. Although I had plenty of friends and I played the gregarious games I was in truth a bit of a loner. I could enjoy the company of my peers, but I could also find excitement or contentment when alone. After school every day I would change out of my school clothes, the only decent clothes I had, and I would roam around the countryside barefoot wearing my ragbag short trousers and shirt. Amongst my friends it was considered "cissy" to wear any kind of footwear except in the worst winter conditions. I must have been a bit of a romantic. Looking at fine scenery, watching the wildlife, gazing at stars, were all occupations, which I found fascinating and rewarding.

In the parks there were red squirrels and I would often go there and feed them. They were very tame and would come up to me and eat out of my hand. I loved to watch the wildlife - grass snakes, hares, and birds. I was interested in their lifestyle and their folklore. I discovered that the bird most welcomed by Polish households is the stork. Cartwheels are often placed on top of chimneys to encourage storks to land there. Good luck will descend with the stork on to the house where it lands.

CHAPTER 4

Our summer holidays were spent on my grandmother's farm. My mother never went with us there as she didn't get on with my paternal grandmother and often accused my father of spending money on his mother that he would not spend on his wife. I loved the farm. It was a very old building made of logs with a thatched roof - small and primitive. Attached to the house was a fairly large lean-to building with large double doors. The building was stacked up with hay to such an extent that it was impossible to open the doors. Access was by a wide opening above them. As the weather was usually hot at the times of our visits, grandmother would give us blankets, we would be lifted up to scramble through this opening, and we would sleep comfortably on top of the hay - much more exciting than normal beds. As we were townies we were quite a novelty to the local youngsters who would come and talk to us, amused at our townie slang and dialect. It amused us that they were amused.

The village was situated on top of a high hill overlooking to one side a vast pine forest. The largest building was a manor house whose owners had little contact with or influence on the life of the villagers. Although reputed to have children we never met them. The road from the valley up the fairly steep side of the hill had to be maintained by the villagers and was, consequently, in very poor condition. Passable, just, with a horse and cart but totally unsuitable for motorised transport. The maintenance, which was carried out only when absolutely necessary consisted of sand and larger stones, transported from the river and dumped into the deeper potholes. In wet weather walking up this road could mean squelching ankle deep through churned up mud. No one wore shoes other than when going to Church on Sunday. As the Church was quite a few kilometres away it was a half days

journey and we youngsters would hitch a lift on the older youths shoulders.

Every farm had big orchards at the rear and no one worried about us picking apples, pears or plums as long as we did no damage to the trees. This was Shangri-La to me. Fields of wheat and grazing land stretched as far as the eye could see on this side of the hill, which had a fairly gentle downward slope. To the front of the village the ground fell steeply to the River Raba giving a magnificent panoramic view of its meanderings, the surrounding countryside and forest and the little town of Gduw. Although I have seen many views - the Alps, the Pyrenees - this particular view is the only one that can make my heart miss a beat.

Tending the farm was very hard work and the two women toiled for long hours, making use of every scrap of available daylight. The cows needed milking, the chickens to be fed, the wheat and hay to be cut and brought in, the fruit to be gathered, the vegetable garden to be hoed. Those were the outside jobs. The wheat and hay were cut by scythe, bundled by hand and stacked in the barns. Neighbours helped each other out in these arduous tasks and they also joined in the threshing of the wheat. The barn floor was swept and scrubbed clean and the wheat laid out. Four villagers armed with flails would beat the wheat one after the other rhythmically, never ever getting their flails entangled. From outside the barn it sounded like a well-oiled machine chugging along. The straw was then picked up and vigorously shaken to loosen all the ears, bundled and stacked for use in the cowsheds and for fodder. The ears were gathered into sacks to await the next process.

When all the farms had gathered in their wheat and the flailing had been completed, the individual farmers would then concentrate on turning the wheat into flour. The ears were emptied into a hopper attached to which was a large fan operated manually by a handle at each end. The chaff would be blown

away by the wind created by this fan and the ears were then ready for grinding. Two large round heavy pivoted stones, made to revolve with the use of a long wooden pole attached vertically to the top stone near its outside edge, pulverised the grain and the flour was extracted. The husks were discarded and the flour bagged for home use or for sale in the local market place. The villagers all baked their own bread in the large kitchen fire ovens.

Milk was not sold. It was used to make butter and cheese, both hand churned, which were sold at market together with eggs, potatoes, fruit and vegetables. The farmers were just about self-sufficient as far as food was concerned but none could be said to be rich or even well off.

One character that lived on the perimeter of the village in a shack was very unwelcome there. He was a drunkard, dirty and smelled. A big swarthy man with a matted black beard, he was always seen carrying a heavy cudgel and leading several dogs. I was told that he was a very undesirable character and I should not go near him. That made me curious and I went to investigate, talked to him and took quite a liking to him. He was a self-sufficient person and his trade was in dogs- breeding, killing, skinning, cooking and eating them. The rendered fat he sold in the markets as an ointment for relief of chest complaints. The skins he cured and sold. The meat he ate. He was considered a misfit and an eccentric, an undesirable in the village, tolerated and avoided. I was never frightened of him, but there again I never saw him kill anything.

Village houses never had any locks on the door. There was no thought of mistrust between villagers and no crimes. It was a peaceful friendly place where I could safely wander at will and have adventures. I would watch my uncle, who also lived on the farm, in his workshop. This was the farmhouse kitchen, which he used while his wife and mother in law were outside tending the farm. He was a cabinetmaker and when he was not repairing

farm implements he would be making furniture. I used to gather up piles of wood shavings and then sit on top of them watching and asking questions. I was a nosy child, always wanting to know what, why, how and when. Nothing was wasted. The wood shavings were gathered up and used as firelighters. Any spare off cuts would also be used as fuel.

Water was quite a problem in the village. There was one well, which because of the position on top of the hill was very deep. All the villagers had to use this one well and my grandmother's farm was one of the furthest away. Two buckets suspended from a yoke carried over the shoulders was the method used for transporting the water from the well to the farmhouse. It could mean several trips a day. Leading them to a trough near the well once a day watered the cattle. Dogs were not kept on the farms as they were considered parasites. All animals had to earn their keep. Cats, however, were kept for controlling the rodent population. They were given milk to drink but if they wanted to eat they had to hunt and catch the food for themselves. Nothing was wasted, all unused produce was recycled as food for the animals, all waste was composted and used as fertiliser, and everything was carried out in primitive buildings and with primitive tools but was exciting to we town dwellers.

The journey from our flat to the farm was made on top of my grandmother's cart. My father would take the opportunity to return with his mother when she had been to Krakow market with some of her produce, thereby saving the bus fare. The journey was very slow as thirty kilometres are a long way by horse and cart and no doubt we young boys made a nuisance of ourselves. My father would stay for a few days and then return to work leaving us at the farm for a month or so in grandmother's care.

On one such holiday, I persuaded my father to take Joseph and myself swimming in the local river. My father was not too keen as he couldn't swim, but I persuaded him. I had seen youths

in the past using their long johns as floats and I persuaded my father he could do the same. All he had to do was to tie knots in the legs and then beat the water with them until they ballooned and then tie the top. He could then use them to float on the river. When we descended the steep slope to the bank I immediately undressed, dived in and swam to the opposite bank where there was a sandy shingle beach. My father had started to undress and had taken his eyes off Joseph for a few seconds. Joseph, unaware of the danger, took the opportunity to follow me. He couldn't swim. The current started taking him down stream and my father panicked. He was shouting and screaming for help, but there was no one else around. Although I was not a strong swimmer, and could in fact at that time only swim under water, I jumped back in the water and managed to grab Joseph and swim with him to the bank. My father ran along the bank and pulled us both out- my first life saving job at the tender age of five. That was my father's one and only trip to the river to swim and the trick with the long johns remained untested. When he returned home my father proudly recounted the story to his work colleagues and for some time after this I was often patted on the head and told I was a little hero.

CHAPTER 5

One day, back in Dombie, when I was playing with friends on some spare ground near my home, something happened which was to spark off in me a life-long obsession. A small aeroplane, which we had been watching as it flew overhead suddenly, came crashing down to the ground not many yards away from where we were playing. We stood open mouthed as the pilot, dressed in full flying kit, leather jacket, helmet, goggles and boots, eased himself out of the upturned plane. As he emerged he noticed us gaping transfixed to the spot and waved nonchalantly to we awestruck boys then calmly walked off. I saw this pilot as a "phoenix rising from the ashes", someone magnificent, daring even immortal, and from that moment on I was smitten. I knew that flying was the one thing I wanted to do more than anything else in the world.

Nearby was an airfield and after witnessing this lucky escape, much of my time I spent at the perimeter fence gazing longingly and wistfully at the aircraft as they came and went. As I got bolder I crawled under the fence in order to get nearer to the aircraft and hangars. If I were lucky the personnel there would allow me to stay and watch them working. If I were unlucky they would chase me off and threaten to tell my father that I had been trespassing on military property. However many times I was chased away I was always drawn back as if by a magnet - a little face pressed against the fence anticipating the time when I would actually be taking off and landing in my own aeroplane.

Pocket money was unheard of. My mother would buy a big bag of sweets once a week and although I would meet her from work on payday, she would not allow any of the sweets to be touched until we got home. There they would be painstakingly counted out into four piles on the kitchen table, with four pairs of eyes watching every move to ensure equal shares.

The big cinemas in Krakow were out of our reach as they were expensive, but there were the smaller "fleapits" which were very cheap and which were just affordable if you could collect sufficient empty bottles to sell to the local scrap yard. There were occasions when we could only afford one ticket between us. Then one of us would enter by the front door paying at the kiosk while the rest of us assembled at the back near the exit doors. Once inside the cinema the ticket holder would open the exit door and let the rest of us in. When we were spotted by the ushers we would charge round the cinema each going in different directions, then bob down and crawl under the seats and emerge innocently in a different part of the auditorium. The ushers would eventually give up the chase and we would watch the film. This was all part of the game and often more exciting than the film. There were, however, times when we would be caught and ejected. Then we would have waited outside and make do with the graphic details as told by the one who had paid. The films shown at these "fleapits" were not the big spectacles but the Roy Rogers and Lassie type of films. However, this didn't matter to us. We could leave the real world behind for a short while and live in an imaginative and adventurous one for an hour or two.

Children in the various districts around Krakow were very territorial and outsiders were not welcome in other districts. Newcomers living in a district might not be accepted straight away. It might be some months before you were accepted in the community. Straying into somebody else's territory was like asking for a beating. As I was not very big or physically strong I relied on my running speed to get me out of trouble when 'trespassing'. Being adventurous and nosy with it, I was often to be found in the adjacent districts and also being chased out of them.

Each of the flats where we lived had its own allotment for growing vegetables etc. My father grew carrots and tomatoes and I would often go with him when he went to water the plants. In a neighbouring allotment there was a pumpkin that I had watched getting larger and larger. Pumpkins grew all over the area, but this was one of the biggest ones I had seen. I coveted that pumpkin. It would make a superb boat. So I plotted, with a friend, to steal this pumpkin. We waited until there was nobody around and approached the allotment. We crawled on our bellies through the grass, like Red Indians in a Western film, sneaking up on the pumpkin. We moved slowly like snakes, keeping to any cover available so that we would not be seen. What we didn't realize was that anyone looking out of the window in the flats above couldn't fail to see us and of course there was one such lady watching. Ignorant of the knowledge that we had been observed we picked the pumpkin, which took two of us to carry, and retreated the same way we had come. It must have looked odd to a passer-by - an enormous pumpkin travelling across the top of the grass. Once clear of the allotments we broke cover, stood up and made our way to the river. We cut the pumpkin in half, gouged out the insides, fixed a string to it and launched it as a boat. We had a great time. On returning home after playing with our boat all day, we discovered that our parents had been told about the incident and we got the beating that we deserved. My father then had to go and compensate our neighbour for the loss of his pumpkin. This would not amount to much as pumpkins were of very little value in this area.

In winter we were forced to wear shoes. My father knew a shoemaker who would make shoes for us, no doubt at less cost and stronger than they could be bought in the local shops. Because we were not used to wearing anything on our feet throughout the summer months, when winter came we suffered with blisters where the shoes rubbed our feet. As far as I was

concerned, the only thing shoes were good for was sliding on the ice. When the River Biaucha near where we lived froze over, one of our favourite games would be "chicken". The river would have an uneven covering of ice and we took it in turns to dare to run over the ice to the opposite bank in our new shoes. If the ice gave way, which happened fairly regularly, we landed waist deep in the icy cold river. When this happened you ran as quickly as you could home to your mother, your wet clothes clinging icy cold to your skin, bawling your eyes out and vowing never to do it again. That would be the end of your outside activities for the next day or so until your only pair of shoes dried out and by which time the discomfort of the incident had faded in your memory. Within a day or two you were back at the river again playing "chicken".

Christmas Eve was the time in Poland when a big feast was prepared and the Christmas tree was put up and decorated. There were no presents at this time as these were given on St. Nicholas's Day, 6th December. St. Nicholas was a 4th century Bishop of Myra who is said to have brought back to life three boys who had been murdered, and who gave gold to penniless girls for their dowries by throwing it into their houses by night when no-one was looking. He is the counterpart of Father Christmas and in Poland presents are put in children's bedrooms while they are asleep on St. Nicholas Day just as they are on December 25th in Britain.

All the family would gather on Christmas Eve - aunts, uncles and cousins. My father would cook the meal. Everyone would look avidly for the appearance of the first star in the sky and then the feasting began. There would be mushroom soup, carp, homemade sauerkraut, home brewed wine, a variety of home baked cakes. My father made a mean barrel of sauerkraut, which was greatly enjoyed by one uncle who maintained it was good for his indigestion. That was his excuse for making a pig of himself

with second and third helpings. We would then sing carols round the Christmas tree and play records until late into the night. It was one night in the year when we youngsters were allowed to stay up late. The snow would be on the ground - I have never known a Christmas not to be white in that part of Poland - and the air would be crisp and clean. As a bit of a romantic I loved the ceremony and tradition of Christmas Eve.

The following day, Christmas Day, my mother would take us all off to Church. It was one of the times when I went willingly. The Church was decorated and lit with candles and the Services seemed more meaningful at this time.

The Gas Board, where my father worked had a St. Nicholas party every year for the children of its employees and we used to get dressed in our best and set off either with father or with our nanny. There would be cakes and jellies, singing and dancing, entertainment and games. A man dressed up as St. Nicholas was there as well as a man dressed up as the devil. When we went up to St. Nicholas to collect our present from him, we had to dodge the devil. I can remember the first time I saw him I was terrified. I was waiting for the big wind to come and carry my soul away as it had done to the old shoemaker who had committed suicide. Nevertheless, after the first year when nothing bad happened, I became braver and eventually realised that it was only an ordinary man dressed up and I was no longer afraid. It then became good fun trying to trick him. I suppose that all this play-acting was to portray to us children good triumphing over evil.

Our local school held no real fears for me and I continued to achieve reasonable grades each year. However, being left-handed was considered abnormal and I was made to use my right hand for all writing. This I found extremely difficult. I received my fair share of whacking with the long cane, which was kept ready at all times in the classroom.

Being small, I became the target for the school bully at one time. He was a big, hefty individual who would torment the weaker and younger boys if they did not give him whatever he wanted - money, sweets, toys etc. I suppose I put up with his bullying for some time until I realised that if I avoided him, or always had other boys with me, I would not have to face him. There were times, however, when I was caught unawares. Eventually I got a bit fed up of him. Eventually the worm turns. My turning point came one day when I determined that I had had enough. In pretending that I was getting the required article from my bag, I took the lid off my wooden pencil case, took out a pen and lunged at him. The pen nib pierced his ear, for a second his features froze in disbelief, then he realised he had been hurt and ran off howling for his mother. He never again bothered me.

Various visits to nearby attractions were made during the school terms and I plainly remember visiting the salt mines at Wieliczka, a market town about 8 miles from Krakow. These mines were still being worked. The worked out chambers were open to the public. One contained the 180-ft long Chapel of St. Kinga, which had been hewn out of the white crystal rock salt, which had the appearance of white marble, and was illuminated by elaborately carved salt chandeliers. The Chapel was not an ornament but was regularly used for Services. It was a truly marvellous sight. Here we could buy small statues made out of salt that would keep for quite a long time as long as they did not get any moisture on them. I kept mine for a very long time and was very upset when it finally disappeared.

Other visits included the Wawel Museum which housed tapestries, paintings, costumes, weapons, the crown jewels and other antiquities; St. Mary's Church with its famous wood carvings by Wit Stwosz and Wawel Cathedral. A picnic outing took place to a fish farm, where shimmering trout churned the water at feeding time.

The Polish authorities were very keen on health and hygiene and we had regular visits from doctors and nurses. Smallpox and diphtheria vaccinations were compulsory and these were given without reference to parents. You were not even given any warning that they were coming. Your name would be called out, you would go to the front of the class and your injection would be carried out without any further ado.

CHAPTER 6

Through his hard work my father was getting quite well off and had been promoted several times at work. He was a very industrious man and always volunteered for extra work and overtime. There were times when he would go back to the offices during the evening and do the cleaning. There was a rota for the emergency telephones at weekends and my father would always take extra turns to allow others to get out of this chore. The extra money was saved up. When I was about 10 the family had a bungalow built in yet another district of Krakow - Borek (forest). The bungalow had a garden and an orchard. This allowed us to grow our own fruit and vegetables, and to be more self-sufficient as far as food was concerned, but it also meant that each of us boys had to do our share of work in the garden.

The house was built with a cellar half above and half below ground as most of the Polish houses were. This was concreted to keep the water out and used to store wood and coal. The building material was brick some of which my father had bought second hand. He had bought an old derelict country residence in a different part of Krakow. He paid local men to demolish the building and horses and carts from there to Borek transported all the useable materials. He also brought these workers to carry out the building work on the house, but he was forced to employ some Borek men as well to pacify the local builders. The derelict mansion had a very large ceiling rosette, which my father took a great liking to and decided to install in his new bungalow. The workers carefully removed it placed it on a large door and my father and I carried it in this fashion quite a few kilometres to Borek. It was an extremely large and heavy artefact and I was very aggrieved that it always seemed to fall to my lot to do the donkeywork. As the house was not yet ready for the rosette it was

stored in the worker's shed. Unfortunately it never was installed. It was broken at some time during the building process.

Soon after we moved into the bungalow my sister Maria was born. Now we were five.

Alfons my youngest brother had just started school at the age of 5 when he fell seriously ill. The doctor was called and he told my mother and father that he was afraid Alfons had Rabies. We had all heard of rabies and we knew it came from animals, mainly dogs, but we had not heard of anyone who had suffered from the disease. Our first reaction was disbelief. Our second reaction was devastation. What had this young, angelic boy done to deserve this fate? He had never mentioned anything about being bitten by a dog. In his present state he couldn't understand our questions and therefore couldn't further enlighten us. We hoped that the diagnosis was wrong but in our hearts knew that hope was a forlorn one. Alfons laid there in his bed with a nauseas, green coloured discharge emanating from his nose, he was delirious and we had to be careful not to bring any water into his sight or he would scream hysterically. At times he could not recognise any of the family. We were all really upset and frightened. We knew that there was no chance of recovery for him and all we could hope was that the end came quickly so that his suffering was soon over. He was ill for about two weeks. His nose became twisted and distorted. Just before he died, he started to talk rationally, his features relaxed and became normal and although he was very weak, he recognised all of us. He pointed to the corner of the room and asked,

"Who is that beautiful lady?" "I think she has come for me." Then he died peacefully. My mother who was a very religious person was certain that 'the beautiful lady' had been St. Mary. Even my father, who was not a very religious person, was extremely touched by this incident.

Because Alfons's death was the first in our locality from Rabies, the family received a great deal of sympathy from other inhabitants of the area, and a great many people turned up for his funeral. Every day for some time all the family had to have anti-rabies injections and the police had to try and find the cause. They went from house to house in the area trying to find someone who had seen what had happened. We became 'celebrities'. Eventually, the police came across some youngsters who had been playing with Alfons and who remembered him being approached and nipped by a dog whilst he was riding his bicycle. They described the dog to the police and it was eventually found dead. We were now back to four children.

Alfons was not the first dead body I had witnessed. When we lived at Dombie my friends and I heard of a local woman who had died. We didn't really know the woman but we had heard she was a prostitute and had been the victim of a crime of passion. Our curiosity got the better of us and we set off for the mortuary, which was some distance away. We couldn't have been much older than seven or eight but we managed to gain access to the mortuary by pretending that the dead woman was a relative. There were several dead bodies there at the time and we viewed them all. I still can't credit that we scruffy little urchins were allowed access on such flimsy evidence of relationship. Perhaps the attendant wanted to give us the fright of our young cheeky lives. If so, it worked as far as I was concerned. It left a profound impression upon me of a nauseating smell and a desire never to repeat the experience.

CHAPTER 7

After my sixth year at school my mother decided that I should become a priest as she considered that all good Catholics should have at least one priest in the family and one of my cousins who had been studying for the priesthood gave it up to be an actor. I was very upset by the decision, as this profession did not rate very highly in my ambitions. A tailor, who was a good friend of my father, had a brother who was a Salvatori priest. I was taken to see him at the Salvatori School near Krakow. I think I could have put up with life at this school. It was near home. It was also near a military establishment and I loved to watch the soldiers riding their horses and parading up and down. Unfortunately, this school was being closed. In spite of my protestations I was sent to a Salvatori school which was run by monks in Silesia near the German border. This was not state education and my father had to pay a fee every term.

I was very unhappy there. I was 12 years old. It was the first time I had been away from home by myself. I missed my friends and family and I was frightened. The Salvatorians were a German Organisation and I was conscious of a great deal of anti-Polish feeling both from the staff and from the German-speaking pupils who were in the majority. We were all given numbers. Mine was 222.

The building was brand new and set in beautiful countryside. Under different circumstances I could have enjoyed my stay in an around this area. The teachers were Salvatorian Fathers and the workers on the adjacent farm were Salvatorian Brothers. The first year class had about 40 pupils but this dwindled to about 12 per class in the fourth year. Less than a third of the pupils stayed the full course. Although I was upset at being sent to this school, I really tried and worked very hard during my first term there.

The Father Superior was the only Polish priest there, all the others being German or Austrian. Father Thaddeus was my class teacher and also the football coach. I was never ever chosen for the football team, no one other than German boys were ever chosen. And I had to make do with watching from the sidelines. I would quite often be fed up with this and go off into the nearby forest watching the birds and the wildlife. Occasionally I would lose all sense of time and would find the football field empty on my return. I then had to explain why I was late for the next lesson. The forest was very dangerous and out of bounds for individuals as there were many unmarked mine shafts around. We were only allowed there as an escorted party. I would be punished and given a number of 'Hail Mary's' to say.

A lot of time was spent in the chapel on our knees. My knees being of the skinny variety, kneeling soon became uncomfortable and shortly afterwards downright unbearable. Easing up from my knees and adopting a crouching position resulted in a blow from the priest (who always seemed to be waiting to catch me out) and an order to resume the correct position - another five 'Hail Mary's'. Being a bit of a rebel I did not take kindly to any ritual that in my opinion made little or no sense and had scant purpose. God, I believed, was listening to prayers, not measuring the distance between knees and floor. I continued to practice the rituals only in order to keep out of trouble.

A favourite expression of the German boys about we Polish boys was "you are the boys from behind the furrow" indicating that we were country bumpkins and a bit 'thick'. One such boy accosted me on the stairs one day with this insult, which was by now becoming just a little tedious. I countered with, "You come to Poland. You eat Polish bread. You take advantage of a Polish education."

He returned with a further insulting remark about superiority of the German race and I saw red and punched him. He made as if to punch me back and I grabbed him, leaning him back over the stair rail whereupon he started to scream his head off. Father Willibald's office was just at the top of the stairs and he came to see what all the noise was about. We were both called into his office.

Father Willibald asked us what the argument was about. I told him the full story. He was a priest. Priests carried out God's work - priests were fair. He dismissed the German boy and turned to me. He gave me such a whack across the back of my head with a hand resembling a shovel that I slid on the floor clean across the room. I couldn't believe it - -such brutality from a priest. I was disgusted that a priest put his nationality above his priesthood and fairness. That was the beginning of the end of my catholic faith.

Some time after this incident and as far as I am aware totally unrelated to it, I fell ill with a raging temperature. I reported to Father Willibald as the master in charge that I was feeling unwell and when he saw me he picked me up and carried me to the sick bay. The sick bay was empty at the time and I remembered nothing until I woke up to find another boy from my class in the only other bed. What I did not realise until some short time later was that the time was three days after I had been admitted. I had been unconscious for these three days and my companion informed me that I had been at death's door and had even been given the last holy unction. I had not been expected to recover. What I had been suffering from I do not know and still do not know. I attempted to get out of bed to go to the bathroom but my legs would not hold me and I fell on the floor. The Father in charge helped me to the toilet and I returned to bed. Whilst I was convalescing from this illness for two or three weeks I fully expected my parents to come and visit me and maybe take me home for a while. I thought it very odd that they did not but

perhaps they could not get the time off work. When I asked Father Willibald whether when he had spoken to my parents they had given any indication as to when they would visit, to my surprise he replied that he had considered it unnecessary to contact them. I had been on the verge of death and it was not necessary to tell my parents! I could not believe it. I hated Father Willibald for his insensitivity - his inhumanity - his so called Christianity!

Many of the Germans living so near the border would go home for the weekends. Often when they returned they would wave flags sporting the German swastika to deliberately provoke the Polish students. It was often difficult not to rise to the bait. The German authorities were waging a deliberate campaign of intimidation through these students and blatantly professing superiority over the Polish people

The German teacher, who could speak reasonable Polish, would talk to the class in his native tongue totally ignoring the Polish contingent. German had not been a compulsory subject in Polish schools and we were beginners in this language. When we protested that we didn't understand what he was saying, all we were told was, "Look it up in a book." All we Poles, therefore, fell way behind in this subject. I became increasingly disenchanted.

The only light I saw in this darkness was music. I liked music and wanted to join the school band. My instrument was the mandolin, but being left-handed I had to position it upside down. The music tutor insisted that I play right-handed and I found this so difficult that I eventually gave it up.

After these experiences I became rebellious. Whereas in the first half of the year I had tried very hard with my lessons, during the second half I gave up entirely. I went through the motions of going to classes but I put no effort into my work. I didn't consider

the fact that it was me that was losing out or that my father had paid money that he could ill afford for this education. I thought only of my own unhappiness and tried to think of ways of running away. I was very disillusioned with the Salvatorians and the Roman Catholic Church and wanted no more to do with it. My number 222 I have ever since considered bad luck and I avoid anything which contains three twos in its reference number. Such became my obsessional hatred of that place.

At the end of the first year I returned home for the summer holidays. I was happy to be at home with my family but somehow I couldn't get that warm, cosy feeling that I normally experienced on returning home. Something was troubling me. I knew I would not return to that school but I didn't know how to approach the subject with my father. I loved my father and I knew that he would be disappointed and angry. I discussed the situation with my older brother Tony and he was very supportive. He agreed that I should not go back.

I had been at home for three weeks feeling totally disorientated. It would soon be time to return to school. I couldn't go back. It would soon be time for my father to pay next year's fees. I had left some belongings at the school, which would need collecting. It was imperative that I tell my father now or spend another year in Silesia. I was terrified of telling him. In the end I plucked up my courage and told my mother. She then told my father and I had to explain my reasons to him. I took a deep breath, knowing that Tony could not stand up for me in front of father but that he supported me, and I told my father that I would not go back whatever he did to me and that I would run away from home first. My father was incensed with my decision to leave the school, there were angry words, shouting, threats, tears and bad temper, but no beatings or other persuasion could change my mind. My poor father couldn't fathom me out.

There remained the problem of collecting my belongings from the school. Although there was a perfectly good train service my father decided that he and I would cycle to the school. This was a round trip of about one hundred miles and I was a puny thirteen-year-old. Although this was not mentioned, I am sure that this was part of my 'punishment'. We set off during the day and my father refused my requests to stop for something to eat and drink and we continued cycling until he was hungry. My little backside was pretty sore by the time we reached the school.

My father would not go with me into the school and I had to go by myself and explain the situation. I was relieved to find another priest there, not Father Willibald, and he helped me to gather up my things from the dormitory and the classroom and I returned to where my father was waiting outside. To my utter amazement my father insisted that we get straight back on the bikes and set off back home. I was tired. My legs and my backside ached but I had no alternative but to get on the bike and so we set off. It was now getting dark and there was no sign of my father stopping anywhere for the night. After a while, as we were passing a barn full of hay I got off my bike and refused to go any further without rest. He eventually capitulated and we lay down in the hay to rest for an hour or so. We then set off again and when we finally reached home I fell into bed and slept solidly for 36 hours. This could have been partly because of the exhaustion of the trip and partly the mental relief of knowing I had seen the last of that hateful place.

I had not told my parents of my serious illness, as it never occurred to me that I could have given this as my reason for leaving the school. When I did broach the subject and asked them whether they had been informed about it they confirmed that no one had been in touch with them.

My time at that school was the most miserable of my childhood and it somehow changed my outlook on life. I became very suspicious of people in authority and, although I still believed in God, I had a hatred of the Catholic Church and its clergy. My mother was more upset than angry at my renunciation of the Church and tried her best to persuade me to attend Sunday Services. I gave in at times to please her and would set off to go to Church - one of my own choice - and never the one attended by my mother. Of course I never actually arrived there, but my mother was unaware and was satisfied.

As a further punishment I was sent back to my previous school to do my seventh year. This meant that I was in the same class as my friends' younger brothers and sisters and my pride was severely damaged. However, I found the work easy, came out with good grades in my subjects, and was looked up to as a leader by the rest of the pupils.

After this last compulsory year I went to a grammar school in Krakow where I was much happier. This education also had to be paid for but it was a secular school. The rebel in me was still there though and I was still very resentful of authority.

My main ambition and obsession to become a pilot still burned within me and one day I brought a flying book and a borrowed book about prostitutes to school. During one of the lessons I was busy reading the 'rude' book when the teacher came up beside me. Although she took me by surprise I managed to change books so that it looked as though I had been reading the flying book. The teacher said, "How nice it is, Marian, that you take such an interest in flying, but surely it would be much more useful for the time being if you tried to take more notice of your lessons". I breathed a sigh of relief. I obviously had got away with the switch. After the lesson I left the classroom for the break and played happily in the yard until the bell went for the next lesson.

When I returned to the class the teacher punished me and the book was confiscated. Why had she had second thoughts about this seemingly trivial occurrence? Why had she returned to look in my desk? Her actions betrayed some sinister goings on and after school I made my own investigations. I gleaned from other students in the class that a boy who I had regarded as a good friend had betrayed me and had informed the teacher that I had been reading a different book to the one she had seen. Of course she looked in my desk and found the offending book, which, as the incident had passed, I had not bothered to hide away. This caused me to get into a lot of trouble and I was even threatened with expulsion from the school. On the way home from school that day the telltale friend got the wallop that he deserved. A passing postman separated us and asked what was going on. I explained what had happened. The understanding postman listened, then he let me go and said, "OK carry on lad".

Unfortunately I had to report the incident to my parents as the book that the teacher had confiscated did not belong to me but had been lent to me by a girl from a neighbouring village and she wanted it returned. Once more my father had to bail me out and I don't know what excuses and apologies he had to make on my behalf, but he managed to get the book back from my teacher.

Because of this and many other reasons like not paying attention to lessons I was expelled from this school much to my father's annoyance and disappointment. As a potentially clever student I had wasted a great deal of opportunity, time and money. I don't think my father could make me out. At one school I would come out top of the class and at another I would fail miserably. An enigma. I must have been a terrible worry to him.

CHAPTER 8

My elder brother Tony was working as an apprentice motor mechanic and he bought a very old broken down motorbike that he and I renovated. Tony had practical ambitions rather than academic ones and a common sense attitude to problems. It was to Tony that I would go for advice rather than my parents.

I really enjoyed working with anything mechanical and nearly all my spare time was spent working (and sometimes riding) this motorbike. It had been for several years my job to maintain and repair my father's bicycle and the motorbike was a natural extension to this interest. Over the years I had bought my own bicycle. Collecting scrap and empty bottles and selling them to the scrap yard I would buy a wheel, a saddle, a frame. Eventually I put together a rideable machine. This meant that I didn't need to rely quite as much on my running speed when I went into neighbouring villages and I also ventured much further afield getting to know the geography of a much larger area more intimately.

If I wasn't riding my bicycle at any time it was a sure bet that I would be cleaning it, painting it, adding gadgets to it or taking it to bits and reassembling it. I really loved that machine. I was also very proud of it and would take my younger brothers or cousins for rides - me on the saddle and the passenger on the crossbar. It was whilst carrying passengers that two of my accidents occurred.

The first involved my brother Alfons and happened well before his untimely death. He was only a toddler and was sitting on the handlebars enjoying the ride. As we went along I started tickling him. He giggled and wriggled. The more he giggled and wriggled, the more I tickled. The inevitable happened. We both fell off the machine and Alfons suffered a broken leg, which

needed hospital treatment, and I was severely reprimanded by my parents.

The second incident involved my one of my younger cousins - Anna's son Joseph. I was taking Tony's lunch to the garage where he was working. My cousin, who was 5 years younger than I, asked to come with me and so I let him sit on the crossbar of the bike. As we were going over some pretty rough ground we hit a fairly deep dip and found ourselves in painful contact with the ground. I gathered my senses together and looked to see what injuries my cousin had suffered. Horror of horrors. His leg was caught in the spokes of the bike, was obviously broken and doubled up. I sat him on the grass and without much further thought pulled his leg straight. I put him on the bike (the saddle this time) and walked him and the bike to deliver Tony's dinner and then to the Gas Works where my father was working. I told my father what had happened and he immediately took my cousin to the hospital near by. The surgeon on duty was unbelieving and sceptical when I told him what I had done. However, on investigation he found that no further resetting was required and the leg was plastered and we went home.

Although headstrong I rarely panicked and this matter of fact, practical ability for adventurous and makeshift solutions to problems was to stand me in good stead in the years to come. Thankfully, I was blissfully unaware of what the next few years held in store for me. Life continued. Legs healed. Bicycles were taken apart, repaired and put together again and a few more of life's lessons were painfully learned.

Much superior to our previous accommodation, the bungalow still did not have an inside toilet, drainage or running water. A well had been constructed in the garden and water had to be collected from this well by lowering a bucket on a long rope. There was no electricity in the house even though there was an overhead line to a post fairly near at hand. My father would not,

or perhaps could not, pay the price for this to be brought into the house, or for the wiring inside that this would entail. Electricity, convenient for lighting purposes didn't have the variety of uses considered essential today. So oil lamps provided our lights and our cooking was by coal stove.

The toilet was a brick building some distance away from the house in the back garden. It consisted of a "cesspool" - a large hole dug in the ground lined with concrete on top of which the lavatory was built. It had a wooden seat with a separate wooden cover. Ventilation was built into the roof. Access to the "cesspool" could also be made from outside this building. It was from this that once a year, it always seemed to fall to my lot, this "cesspool" had to be emptied by hand and the contents distributed as fertilizer on the garden. This meant getting stripped naked and shovelling out the contents into large buckets. In those days in Poland, this was the way that sewage in many outlying country districts was dealt with and was not at all unusual. However, it was not the most envious of jobs. It may have been because I was small and could get in tight places or that I had displeased my father too much and he felt that I was getting too big for my boots, that I always got this job. On completion of this task my mother would fill some buckets with water, open a high window inside the house and pour the water over me like a shower until I was once again clean, if not altogether free from the distinctive aroma.

One day I was at home by myself when some young boys came running to the house with urgent news. A local woman who was deaf and dumb had been drawing water from the village well and had overreached for the full bucket thereby falling headfirst into the water. She could not get out, she could not shout for help and the children were not big enough or strong enough to pull her out. I rushed over. All I could see was two feet pointing skywards at the end of a pair of legs, which were frantically waving about in the air. I climbed on top of the well wall and

took hold of the inverted legs but try as I may I could not manage to lift her more than a few inches. She was too heavy to pull up from that position. The only thing I could do was to climb into the well and try to push her upwards from below. Luckily, being skinny and having climbed in and out of wells many times before I could do this. I managed by exerting all my effort and levering my back and legs against the walls of the well to push her shoulders a few inches higher. I then shuffled my legs and back a similar distance upwards and repeated the process until slowly but surely the stage was reached where her friends could grab hold of her waist and pull her out. She was out cold for a short while but was brought round by some of the onlookers who had rushed from their houses to see what the commotion was all about. I was thanked profusely and when I found that the woman was all right I returned home. There is no doubt that I saved her life as her head was under the water and she would have drowned in a very short time. I therefore redeemed some of my former misdeeds in the sight of our neighbours. I have to admit that this event is remembered by me primarily not as a rescue but as the first time I had ever seen a pair of women's bloomers other than on the washing line.

CHAPTER 9

My father used his influence to get me a job as an apprentice draftsman in a large engineering firm on the outskirts of Krakow. This was my second choice of career, my first, as I have no doubt mentioned previously being flying. Jobs in this firm were not easy to get as it had the reputation of only recruiting the best tradesmen. Apprenticeships were not lightly given. It was a case of what you know first and whom you know second. I was lucky to have the relevant school grades - my father did the rest. My main tasks were fetching and carrying - acting as a general labourer - and this needed no special skill or intelligence. I was the junior and was therefore sent here, there and everywhere in between studying plans and listing components required for jobs. The firm made steam engines, heavy boilers and bridges. I was in the Bridge Section.

The man in charge of the boilermakers was a nasty character who was always shouting. He would throw a set of plans on my desk, roar at me to get on with them even though I was in the middle of quantifying other plans. If I protested that the job I was doing was urgent he would insist that these were thrown on one side and his done first. He petrified me, but I would not take my orders from him or give him preference without the agreement of the overall manager, who if he was in the office would either nod his agreement or tell the boiler man he had to wait. Occasionally, if my desk got too full of plans waiting quantifying I would get some help.

One of the clerks would always offer to help when the plans were for Government orders and were classified as secret. He would get most upset when I refused to let him see the plans, saying he was a member of the Secret Service and had authority to do so. I would advise him to get permission from my superior first that, of course, he never did. He was an odd character,

always implying that he was not really a clerk but a Government watchdog working in the firm to keep his eye on Government contracts. There were such people in large factories and maybe he was one such but to my mind he was a most unlikely character.

There was no canteen or facilities for tea making. Most workers took sandwiches and a bottle of tea or coffee. We did not have to drink our tea cold, however, as a method of warming it up was devised. A bucket of hot water was brought from the forge and our uncorked bottles were placed in it to heat up. Accidents occasionally happened when glass bottles shattered through being immersed in water too hot. Sandwiches then had to be eaten without the benefit of a warm drink. Outside the main gate a mobile food stall would come. However, the prices were high and unaffordable on an apprentice's wage.

Security was tight. Everyone had to pass through a gate, be identified, and occasional random searches were made. Anyone caught pilfering was immediately sacked.

The walk to and from Dombie where the works were situated took me about three quarters of an hour if I kept up a brisk pace. I could have caught a tram but I was not willing to part with the fare and so I walked. I was in the process of building myself a racing bike, my old cycle which was partly owned by Tony having been long since sold. When this new bike was complete I would be able to use it for getting to and from work.

The money I earned for this job was very small, but the potential was good. The firm paid high wages for high competence. Many of the tradesmen had cars and motorbikes, a sure sign of wealth in Poland at that time. What I did earn I gave to my father which in some measure repaid him for the money he had spent both on my education and in compensation paid out to neighbours for my nefarious exploits. In spite of my dislike of the general labouring part of the job, which was dirty and hazardous, at least I felt that I was no longer a child and had joined the ranks

of the adults with all their perceived freedoms. In truth, life was little different and my activities, if anything, were curtailed because I had less free time.

My cousin Alfons who was the same age as I and came from a larger and poorer family always had stacks of money. He had five brothers and two sisters surviving out of fifteen siblings born to his parents. Uncle Thomas, my mother's brother, worked in a button factory and his job, which was not very well paid, was lacquering the buttons with various colours of paint. It was Alfons who regularly kept the family out of debt. He was a lovable rogue who was constantly avoiding arrest. Occasionally he did not avoid it much to the consternation of his sister Maria who was married to the Chief constable in the area.

My brother Tony saved Cousin Alfons's life one day. Alfons was playing cards with some of his cronies on the banks of the Vistula near where Tony worked. A row broke out over accusations of cheating and Alfons was slashed with a knife on his neck. Tony saw him staggering with blood spurting from the wound and immediately pressed his fingers on the artery to stem the flow before taking him to the local hospital. If he had not done this Alfons would have been dead within a few minutes. Reprisals were taken on the boy who did the slashing and he was beaten up. When Alfons recovered from his wounds the incident was soon forgotten and the two became firm gambling friends once more.

Uncle Thomas was a very religious man and led the procession to Calvary every year. This was a two-day journey and he did all the organisation of arranging accommodation. I once accompanied Alfons and Henry on the pilgrimage, which we all three saw as an opportunity to bamboozle the local stallholders who set up their wares on the roadside to tempt the pilgrims. One would pretend to be looking at an article and whilst he was questioning the stallholder the others would purloin small articles

(which incidentally were of no significant use to us) from the stall. I found out much later that Uncle Thomas was not quite as pious as I had thought. A few extra-marital activities were indulged in during these pilgrimages.

Aunty Helen, uncle Thomas's wife, was the ruler in the household - an imposing matriarch, ample of body and larger than life. She thought nothing of beating her husband or anyone else around. I hardly saw her other than barking out orders from a lounging position on the settee. I never actually saw her doing any chores. If Alfons came home late she knew he had been gambling and would not refrain from browbeating him until he had handed over a goodly amount of his winnings. If when I called at their flat I could hear Aunty Helen's voice, I would make some excuse not to go in waiting outside for Alfons or Henry to appear. She frightened the living daylights out of me

Alfons's main job was selling newspapers. He had a monopoly on several prime sites and made quite a good living. He had his heavies who would chase off any interlopers trying to muscle in on his territory. He would occasionally give me a few zlotys for helping in his enterprises.

Books could be purchased very cheaply at the many second hand bookshops in town and I read adventure stories such as Robinson Crusoe, Around the World in Eighty Days and Stanley's Expedition to Africa. I was more interested in true-life stories than in fiction especially historical happenings. I read very few newspapers. My father was a staunch member of the Labour Party and subscribed to the Labour newspaper, which gave very little news and was highly political. My mother subscribed to the Catholic newspaper, which also gave very little news and was mainly religious. Most of my news came from eavesdropping on conversations in the office at work, where older employees would discuss the latest happenings at home and abroad. I listened to music and local Krakow news on a crystal radio, which I had

constructed. These were my only communications with the wider world affairs.

During this time I attended technical college two half days a week and soon became top of the class. I liked this part of the job best. Technical drawing, maths and reading of drawings, were the main occupations. On the course were apprentices from other areas of work - there was a typewriter engineer and workers from the museums. The latter was the elite job consisting of making replicas of the museums antiquities and covering every aspect and sphere of the engineering world. It was impossible to get a job there unless you had a great deal of influence.

Although I continued to visit the farm, this was limited to two or three days at a time. I holidayed further afield with friends. One of these friends was slightly older than I and originally had been Tony's friend. He was called Stanislaw Front and we got on together very well, having a similar intellect and similar pursuits. He had relations who lived in the Tatra Mountains, which bordered Czechoslovakia, and we spent some time there climbing the mountains, swimming in the clear mountain rivers and looking for game in the forests. We even strayed into Czechoslovakia, which was just over the other side of the mountains. There were no border guards and things looked just the same whichever side of the mountain you were.

The Tatra Mountains were also visited in the company of my cousins Alfons and Henry. Alfons was a born entrepreneur. Whatever he could lay his hands on by fair means or foul were saleable goods. He bought stolen goods, he smuggled, he traded in the market places, and he gambled. If there were any money to be made, Alfons would be there. Henry although older was a bit dim and accompanied Alfons as his carrier.

Alfons, as part of his dealings, bought at auction three really clapped out bikes which all put together would not make one decent machine. But Henry, Alfons and I set off for Nowy Targ

in the Tatra Mountains on these three wrecks. Alfons's reason was to sell smuggled flints or penknives in the area. Before we had been half a day on our way, one bike was abandoned as beyond salvation and the journey continued with three people riding two bicycles. We stayed at Nowy Targ for two or three days, sleeping in stables and returned home on only one machine. On the downward slopes there would be one person on the crossbar, one pedalling and one standing on the back wheel axle. The bike was pushed up the hills.

With my current girl friend's brothers I made a visit to a new hydroelectric station, also in the Tatra Mountain region. This was publicised as a showpiece and vindication of a new type of work scheme. I felt it was important to go and see it. The dam had been built by youth labour. A kind of work scheme where discipline was military, a military type uniform was worn and where the previously unemployed youths could learn a trade at the same time carrying out useful work. We cycled there, were suitably impressed, spent the night in the open air, and cycled back the following day.

My first girl friend, who was a little older than I, had been the one who lent me the sexy book, which had caused the furore at school, and it was with her that I had my first practical sex education lesson. Sex at that time was not talked about openly, my parents had not given me any pep talks nor had there been any at school. Sex was learned surreptitiously on street corners accompanied by much giggling and many tall stories of personal experiences. I had proudly bought condoms and carried them secretly in my pocket but when the time came for fitting them they were too big and just fell off. At fourteen I was obviously a little under-developed. Most of my girl friends thereafter had been casual affairs until now.

I had a special girl friend (Zena) that lived in a neighbouring village. We used to go for walks or sit in her parent's front garden. Occasionally we would baby sit for her aunty and even more occasionally we would go to the cinema. I was fairly well known in that village as a regular visitor at her house. The local youths took exception to strangers courting their girls - this was not unusual in districts of the town - but I could deal with them as long as they appeared only in pairs or threes. After leaving her house I would walk home past the cemetery and a wooded area then over the hill to Borek. One late evening as I was walking towards the cemetery I heard a rifle shot and the hiss as the bullet passed my head. Immediately I dived into the ditch at the side of the road and stayed there for some time. I heard no more shots, but I crawled along the ditch for some way before emerging and sprinting away and over the hill.

Whether this incident was a reprisal from the local youths or a stray poachers shot I do not know, but I watched my back a little more enthusiastically thereafter. It certainly didn't warn me off if that is what was intended.

During that winter my cousin Henry and I borrowed a toboggan and we went to visit Zena one evening intending to have some sport sledging down the hilly roads around there. As we approached her house I told Henry that he may as well carry on up the hill and that Zena and I would catch him up. Zena had already gone out sledging I was informed and so I set off after Henry but had not gone very far when I was accosted by a gang of local youths. While one of them argued with me another cracked me on the head from the rear with a garden post. As I fell to the ground they started kicking me and no doubt would have continued but a local woman came out of her house and chased them off. She asked if I was all right to which I answered yes and I then struggled off up the hill feeling rather dizzy and slightly sick to where Henry was waiting. We got on the toboggan and

sped down the hill but when we reached the bottom I told Henry that I was not feeling well and would have to go home.

When I arrived home I went straight to bed and went to sleep. On waking I vomited and fell down on getting out of bed. My parents were shocked and frightened at this and I had to tell them what had happened. A doctor was immediately sent for and he feared that I had a fractured skull. There were no indentations in my skull, probably the thick woolly hat I was wearing at the time afforded me some slight protection, so he just ordered me to stay in bed and gave me some medicine. For some time I was unable to eat anything without vomiting and the dizziness continued. Gradually I came round and returned to work.

Whilst I was ill in bed my brother Tony set off with Cousin Henry to find the culprits. They visited the woman who had saved me further injury by her timely arrival at the spot and who had chased my assailants away. From her they ascertained their names and addresses - they were well known to her. They had some sort of trade in pigeons at the Podgurze market and one day fairly soon afterwards they were set upon at the market and given a hiding by my cousin and my brother. All their pigeons were set free. Revenge had been taken. Assaults such as these were rarely reported to the police and it was common for retribution to be meted out in this manner by the aggrieved person's relatives.

CHAPTER 10

Youths attending Technical College had to have compulsory military training in their spare time. This could be either with the army or airforce. Because of my consuming interest in flying I applied to join the flying school near where we lived. This was shortly after my unfortunate head injury and I failed the medical. My balance had been impaired. I could not stand on one leg.

Without further ado I went home and practised. I was determined I would not fail a second time. Any spare moments were spent seeing how long I could imitate the stork. Eventually by perseverance I improved sufficiently to apply once more to the flying school and this time I passed and was accepted. The school taught glider flying and I was overjoyed that my dream was beginning to take shape. I was taking to the air.

Anyone who has flown in a glider will be aware of the sensations, which are evoked when soaring in the sky. My euphoria alternated between a sense of superiority on looking down on the earth, detached as if on a different plane, and the smallness of my actions and me as an individual on earth when viewed from a great height. I had a feeling that I was sitting motionless up above while the rest of humanity was scurrying about around me like so many industrious ants. Doing what I had dreamed of doing for many years, and indeed what I had tried to simulate as a child by launching myself from the top of an artesian well sporting only an umbrella or a billowing coat, became the happiest period of my youth. I was an ardent and conscientious learner, spending much of my spare time in practice and theory. I never doubted my ability and was therefore not surprised when, in 1938, I got my gliding qualifications.

Gliding was all very well but was only playing at flight. The flames of ambition had been fanned and flying became a burning obsession. I longed to get behind the controls of a proper

aeroplane. I had to get a C Glider pilots licence so that I could graduate to this. Enquiries were made on how to further my training. It would mean attending full time flying school the nearest one being situated near the Russian border. I was determined to gain these qualifications and so I applied and was accepted. I determined that nothing and no one would stand in my way. I left my job. I had only completed one year of my four-year apprenticeship. It had in my opinion been only second choice as a career and as such, whatever the prospects, its abandonment did not cause me any qualms. This once again upset my father as he could see no future in his paradoxical son's ambitions to fly. Nevertheless, his arguments, his anger, his persuasion were no match for my obsessive desires and he gave in. Once more he forked out for my board and lodgings at the Flying School.



The School was called Sokala Gura near Krzemieniec (renamed Kremenez now it is in Russia). It was run by LOPP (League of Polish Air Defence) and had between 40 and 60 trainees or qualified pilots. The area was extremely flat with one high ridge facing the prevailing winds, which provided ideal conditions for flying. One very large room was the dormitory for

the trainees. The pilots had smaller single rooms. The dining room was on the ground floor as was the maintenance shop. Outside there were two hangars where the precious gliders were housed. I was away from home and friends but this time I was not homesick. All the students here were of one mind. All wanted to fly. The conversations were mainly on one topic - aircraft and the flying thereof. The books we read were of aircraft and flying. There was a great camaraderie regardless of age or social status.

I was still only 16 years old when I got my C pilots badge. I stayed on at the school gaining flying experience for some time after this. However, the money my father paid for board and lodging was fast running out and I doubted whether he could be persuaded to carry on funding my "whims". My next logical step would be to be accepted at the military flying school near Krakow and become a fully-fledged pilot.

The decision I had to make was somewhat taken out of my hands. Early in 1939 there were many comings and goings and although at first we attached no significance to these, they became impossible to ignore. Speculations and rumours were rife. Questions we asked were nonchalantly evaded. There was pretence of knowing nothing. We were not all fools. We could tell when officers were putting on an act. It was obvious that something was up. There was a feeling in the air that something was about to happen. It was unnerving and it made us edgy.

One day we were called together and told that we were all to return home. No explanations. No reasons. No questions answered. There is only one thing worse than knowing something is wrong. Not knowing, only speculating on what is wrong. Conjuring up situations, which may or may not happen. We left the school with a feeling of bewilderment.

When I reached Lvov Railway Station I was confronted with total and absolute confusion and chaos. The men were all clutching call up papers heading for the trains, but nobody knew

which train was going where. The station personnel answered every query with the claim that it was "top secret", a cover-up for not knowing anything themselves, consequently no one could find out anything about what train was going where and when. I began to get worried about ever reaching home when I finally found a sympathetic porter, who told me,

"Go to platform number ... If the train arrives it will be going to Jaroslav, Przemysl and eventually Krakow."

I was lucky. When the train arrived I was one of the first to board and managed to get a seat. Most of the passengers had to stand the whole way. August 1939. It was war. The invasion of Poland had begun.

The train trundled on very slowly. Every time an aeroplane was heard overhead we expected to be bombed and there was panic. Eventually the train reached Krakow late afternoon the day after I had left the school and my father was there to meet me. (I had managed to send a telegram home before leaving the school and, more miraculous, it had reached its destination). Here again was confusion and chaos. There were Polish soldiers firing their rifles at aeroplanes flying overhead irrespective of the fact that they were Polish aircraft. When I asked one of them why he was firing at a Polish aeroplane he answered,

"That is not a Polish 'plane."

"But can't you see the Polish insignia?"

"That is a German 'plane sporting the Polish insignia."

And he carried on firing at his unreachable target. Such was the mentality and preparedness of the Polish army for war.

I had not eaten since leaving the school and I was desperately hungry when I got home. My mother was pleased to see me and welcomed me with open arms. I was pleased to be in Borek where things were relatively quiet and normal.

CHAPTER 11

My tranquillity was very quickly shattered. I had only been home one day when there was a knock at the door. A self-appointed "sergeant" with several men carrying shovels and pick-axes presented himself. He ordered,

"All males to bring along a shovel and pick-axe and follow me."

I asked,

"For what purpose".

"We are digging trenches around Borek."

"But why", I asked.

"For defence purposes."

I explained that there were no military around Borek and that the defences were already there - fortifications to the east, fortifications in Krakow to the west, fortifications on other side of the river to the south and fortifications to the north.

"If you do not join us, then you are a collaborator and you will be shot."

"Who by?"

"The military."

I refused. There was no military around Borek. He eventually left with his little band of diggers in tow. After digging for half a day, they were fed up and disillusioned and went off home leaving the "sergeant" alone surveying his "trench". This illustrates the panic and mentality of people when confronted with a crisis. The "sergeant" was doing his bit out of a sense of loyalty and because he felt he had to organise something. There was this thirst for action, which had to be assuaged.

Germany and Russia, in spite of having agreements to preserve the present borders of Poland for some years yet, got together and decided to divide Poland between them. Germany was to take over the western half and Russia the Eastern. Half of Poland was to be included in the Germany of the Third Reich and

the other half was to be a satellite state occupied and administered by Germany. The German occupation included Krakow and the Polish nationals were extremely oppressed. Germany's intention was to create a race of second class citizens and the Poles were to be denied education and become the slaves of their oppressors. "It will be my task to remove every manifestation of polonism within the next few years..."said Gauleiter Forster at Bydgoszcz on 27th November 1939. "Not an inch of land we have conquered will ever belong to a Pole again. Poles can work for us, but not as rulers, only as serfs." declared Gauleiter Greiser at Gniezno a year later. Dr. Robert Ley, Hitler's close collaborator stated quite clearly "A lower race needs less space, less nourishment and less culture than a higher race." More then six million people died as a result of the war, but only one tenth of that number because of the hostilities - the rest were tortured and/or killed by the Nazi's to satisfy their ideals.

The Polish army were powerless, and disorganised and no match for the German invaders but they had not surrendered. The authorities were well aware that Germany was preparing for war but did not want to start mobilisation of troops for fear of accelerating action. They wanted to give no excuse for the Germans to start their action. In the event, the Germans needed no such excuse. The mobilisation of the Polish army when it came was unplanned, uncoordinated and chaotic. Men were being called up, going to railway stations with no idea of where they were heading. Nor was there anyone there to tell them. The German army advanced through Poland finding only pockets of resistance, which were soon crushed. The Polish forces eventually had to retreat after putting up a brave fight to try and save their capital city of Warsaw. Many fled to Romania and Hungary where they began reforming, some disappeared, many discarded uniforms and weapons and went into hiding. Others

joined the underground movements, re-arming and waiting their opportunity.

One of the first things that happened when it was apparent that the Germans would soon occupy the city was the destruction by the Polish nationals of machinery in the factories. This was done to make sure that the invaders could not make use of any manufacturing process. The shops were also looted and left empty of produce. There were free for all situations with the weak unable to purchase the necessities to keep them alive. There was no work as the factories and shops had closed down and residents wandered about the city unsure of what to do and where to go. Even the Gas Works where my father worked was closed down for a short while. Living conditions in the interim period between the knowledge that the Germans were coming and their eventual arrival was made extremely difficult because of the mentality and stupidity of some of the Polish inhabitants who denuded the city of all its foodstuffs and produce to the detriment, not of the Germans, but of the local inhabitants. Much of this looting was carried out, no doubt, for personal gain under the guise of civilian war tactics.

One little light shone in my darkness. I heard that the hated Father Willebrand had been shot as a German informer by the Polish military. I felt that my judgement of him as anti-Polish during my schooling in Silesia had been totally justified. I shed no tears over his demise. He had got his just desserts.

Life under German occupation was far from easy for the ordinary citizens. It did at least bring about some stability out of the chaos. Essential services were restored. My father returned to work but for new masters - the German administration. Poles had to register in order to get ration cards for food (if there was any food to be had). When bread was expected in the shops we would have to queue for hours often to find that a German lorry came along and commandeered all the stock leaving nothing for the

expectant queue. The Germans would take whatever food they wanted and anything that was left was good enough for the Polish people. All firearms had to be surrendered. Anyone found with any weapon was liable to be shot or despatched to a concentration camp. Money was valueless as the Germans introduced their own currency. It was their intention to issue a new kind of currency based on both German and Polish coinage but this was never carried out. No one wanted money. Everyone was afraid of exchanging goods for money, as no one knew when the current coinage would become obsolete. The exchange rate became goods and services.

I managed to exchange my old clapped out motorbike for two sacks of flour and a pair of leather boots. This was a marvellous deal as far as I was concerned. The motorbike was no good without petrol and my mother had flour enough to bake bread for some time to come. I was released from the inevitable and often unrewarding queuing.

Cousin Alfons made the most of the situation. There was now more money to be made from black market and smuggled goods and he made it.

There was no restriction of movement within the country, but if you were on a train the occupying forces would question where you were going and for what purpose. Poles were only allowed to travel third class, the first and second-class compartments being reserved for the Germans. There was no petrol available for ordinary citizens as it was all requisitioned by the occupying forces. Rail became the main form of travel and it was easy for the Germans to question ordinary citizens as to their business.

Schools, colleges and the University were all taken over by the Germans for their own countrymen's use. All the Polish intellectuals were either killed or sent to labour camps. Houses were often searched under the pretext of looking for arms, but I suspect more for a showing of strength. The newspapers were all

taken over and all the articles printed in them were biased towards the occupying country. Notices were often posted informing the people of various orders and certain buildings and areas were labelled "Germans only". As often as possible the Polish people pulled down these notices, but this had to be done undercover as anyone found doing so would have been shot. The whole atmosphere was of fear and hatred of the Germans. The only people who were hated more were the Polish people who collaborated with the Germans.

There were various uniforms displayed by the occupying forces - the SS (Gestapo), the Tank Regiments, and the Wehrmacht. The uniforms themselves did not strike fear into the citizens. It was the face and bearing of the wearer that did this. The German soldiers must have been well trained in visually portraying superiority with their unsympathetic and unyielding expressions which drove us to pass them by unnoticed whenever possible.

One day I was walking along the pavement minding my own business when I saw coming towards me two German soldiers. As I was about to pass them by, one of them knocked me into the gutter with his rifle butt. There was nothing I could do about this. If I had retaliated I would have been shot. I had to stifle my anger and walk away with his laughter ringing menacingly in my ears. It was extremely dangerous to be anywhere in the city especially if there were large German movements. This usually meant that an area would be sealed off and all the inhabitants rounded up and either killed or taken away to concentration camps. It was even more dangerous if you were in a Jewish area when the round-ups were carried out.

The Jews, who were the main sect of people singled out by the Germans out of pure hatred, were systematically herded into one area of the town. They were then rounded up, put into lorries and despatched to Concentration camps. My Aunty Anna, who

worked for Jewish families, although not of the Jewish faith was also included as a Jewish sympathiser. She was taken to Auschwitz.

My grandmother had sent a message that she had some potatoes for us so one day my brother Tony set off on his bicycle to fetch them. He never arrived at the farm. As he was cycling along the main road, a German army lorry swerved and ran him down. He was taken to hospital and given the last rites. He had been courting a girl and they had arranged to be married shortly because she had told him she was pregnant. He expressed a desire to marry her immediately in hospital and I was sent to fetch her. Unfortunately he died of his multiple injuries before I could contact her and fetch her to the hospital. Peasants who had witnessed the accident told us that the lorry had swerved deliberately and that Tony's unfortunate death was not an accident. Whether this was true, no one will ever know, but because of other atrocities, which were carried out by the Germans, I am inclined to believe that Tony was deliberately killed.

After Tony's death his girl friend still visited our house and her pregnancy miraculously disappeared. I had always suspected that it had been a put up job to force Tony into an early decision to marry. She began setting her cap at me. My parents would deputise me to walk her home after her visits. But after one fleeting sexual liaison with her on one of these occasions I avoided her and eventually her visits stopped.

In the villages there was less evidence of the occupation, but even here every so often troops would march through, just to let us know that they were there and to intimidate the populace. Some of the Polish army were so afraid of the occupying forces that they had deserted and had hidden their weapons and uniforms to escape being killed or tortured by the Germans.

My friend -Stanislaw Front who was an apprentice to a Krakow electrician, and who was one of my few close companions - recruited me to an underground resistance movement made up of young people and students. The main purpose of this organisation at the time was finding and collecting the weapons and ammunition, which had been hidden. We had to first gain the confidence of frightened farmers and landowners so that we could search their barns and their land. This was often difficult; as they were afraid of anyone they did not know. Many were reluctant to be implicated. We could have been German collaborators or informers. We had to convince them otherwise. Some were pleased that we would search their land and outbuildings, as it was safer for them that we rather than the Germans found any hidden weapons. Sometimes the farmers knew where the arms were hidden which made our job easier. We had to do the collections under cover of darkness. We would oil some rags, use these to wrap up the weapons and then dig pits in order to hide them for later use against the Germans by the Polish underground. We would then report back via our contact the number and nature of the weapons hidden. This was extremely dangerous; as if the Germans had caught us we would have been shot. Our instructions were that at this time we should only practice passive resistance and avoid being discovered.

For safety reasons this movement was broken up into small groups of no more than six people with only one contact with the rest of the organization. This was so that if one person was discovered there was a limit to the number of people who could be implicated. Our contact was Stanislaw. The rest of the group consisted of me, my brother Joseph, my cousins Gerard and Alfons and another friend called Janek.

CHAPTER 12

Late December 1939 one of our group members (Janek) got arrested. No one knew why he had been picked up - it could have been for some simple misdemeanour or for his underground involvement. There was always the chance that under threat he could implicate some of us. It was difficult to find out without appearing to be compatriots and we were not willing to take this risk. So we discussed the matter and decided to plan for our members being discovered. Gerard, Alfons and I decided to head for the Russian border and Stanislaw elected to stay and take the risk. We agreed to meet the next morning and to board the train to Jaroslaw that was on the frontier. We had not involved Joseph in our plans at this time as we felt that he was too young and was unlikely to be implicated. I went home and acted as if nothing had happened and I don't think my parents suspected that anything was wrong. The following morning, with a certain amount of apprehension, I asked Joseph to walk with me to the station. On the way I told him what we were going to do and asked him to break the news gently to my parents. You may ask why I did not do this before leaving. Cowardice. My mother would have cried and pleaded with me not to go and I couldn't face this. I had put on my warmest and oldest clothes and I told Joseph that he could have the good ones (including my leather jacket) for himself. I carried nothing else but my papers. When we got to town, I kissed Joseph and told him to be helpful to our parents. We then parted. He went back home and I left for a final destination only vaguely envisaged.

I wish I could say that this decision to leave was to protect my family. I wish I could say I agonised over the pros and cons. I wish I could say that I was talked into it. I wish I could say that it was the only thing to do in the circumstances. However, I can't with all honesty say any of these things influenced my decision. I

think that I used the circumstances as an excuse to get away from the area and the oppression. I could have gone into hiding as others did. Maybe fate had a hand in it. I was afraid and wondered what would happen to us but I was also elated as at the start of an exciting adventure.

We were not stopped or challenged by the militia and reached Jaroslow without incident. This frontier town was on the new Russian frontier that before 1939 had been part of Poland. Our aim was to reach Hungary or Romania that is where the Polish army had retreated. We hoped eventually to reach Britain. The train arrived mid afternoon and as we were not going to attempt to cross the border until nightfall we spent some time just wandering around the town, talking to people and having a some food and drink in one of the local hostelries. Others who had the same intentions enlarged our little band and we pooled our resources together to hire a horse and sledge. The driver of the sledge took us alongside the River San, which was frozen, until he found us a spot narrow enough and safe enough to cross. Here he waved us goodbye, wished us luck and returned to the town.

We all crossed the river safely and entered a forest. It was dark and eerie but there was comfort and safety in numbers. We were now in Russian territory and we had not been challenged. There was snow on the ground, it was cold, but the excitement and adrenalin ensured that we were not too uncomfortable. The cover of the trees in the forest, however, came to an end and we could see a railway embankment on the horizon. We stopped and discussed our next moves. We had two choices. To risk crossing an open space to reach the railway line and then hope to hitch a lift on a train heading south or at least follow the tracks, or to continue south under cover of the forest edge uncertain of how long the cover would last. There were two different schools of opinion and agreement could not be reached so we separated. My cousin Gerard and I went in one group, which went across the

open space towards the embankment. The other group of which my cousin Alfons was a member headed alongside the forest. The snow was unmarked, white and crisp. No sign of any human presence traversing it for some considerable time. It looked a fairly safe bet. What we had not considered was that the snow, which would have shown up our enemies also, made us vulnerable to discovery. The Russian guards must have been just over the other side of the embankment and had spotted us. They started firing and as we were mid way between the forest and the embankment we were sitting ducks and could do nothing other than fall to the ground. We were well aware of what would happen to us if we did not. The other group managed to get away, mainly because the guards were concentrating on watching us. It was the 1st of January, 1940, the beginning of a new year, and there we were, half way across an open space, faces in the wet snow, at the mercy of Russians firing flares which lit up the sky and the hungry barking of man-hunting dogs. So we were captured.

We were taken at bayonet point to a building somewhere near the railway, counted, and locked up for the night. We were not unduly worried at this stage as we expected to be released when we had explained our circumstances. During the night a pregnant woman (a Jewess of about 25 years old) was brought in. She had been stabbed in the lower part of her abdomen by the bayonet of a Russian Guard. Why was a mystery to us. She had been given no medical treatment and was in extreme agony and bleeding profusely. We managed to help her by tearing underwear into bandages and covering her wounds in an attempt to stop the bleeding. We knocked on the door to ask the guards for assistance but our pleas were ignored. In the morning we were marched out, searched and again counted. Our possessions and documents were taken and we were interrogated. These interrogations were a bit of a fiasco as the Russians did not speak

Polish and we did not speak Russian. We did not see the injured woman again and I have no knowledge of what happened to her.

We then set off by foot on quite a long march to the prison at Przemyśl. During the march, on a few occasions, we were allowed to stop by the farms to get drinks. At these times there was often some confusion and some prisoners took the chance to escape. When we reached the town's suburbs the Russians who were quite well aware that prisoners were missing decided to take a count. It was rather unfortunate for some of the bystanders because when the guards confirmed the shortage the innocent onlookers were taken to make up the numbers. No amount of complaining by them made any difference. They were threatened with bayonets and had to comply if they did not want to be injured. I began to feel just a little uneasy about these 'civilised' Russians.

We reached Przemyśl prison where we were again counted and searched, this time more thoroughly. We were again interrogated brusquely and in a foreign tongue -

"Name,"

"where have you come from?"

"parents names,"

"grandparents names,"

"where are you going?"

"what for?"

"You lying

The Ukrainians who could speak some Russian interpreted for us and we answered as best we could in our own language. Any possessions, which the guards had missed the first time, were now confiscated, including even handkerchiefs. As we were interrogated in groups of about five or six we did manage to pass some small possessions to prisoners who had already been searched, but these were very few. We were still hopeful of our release, as they had nothing to charge us with. We had been

wrongly arrested. We were not criminals. Russia was a civilised country, which treated its subjects in a fair and civilised manner. Wasn't it?

It was a very cold winter - the snow was thick outside. I had never been inside a prison before. What was I doing here? Why wasn't I at home in comfort with my family? How had I come to be in this predicament? I was afraid and apprehensive, but I still thought that I would soon be free. Gerard and I were not criminals like the majority of the inmates. The cell to which we were taken seemed a fairly large room but all that I could see at first glance were men, men and even more men. The room was packed full of men. As I got over the initial shock of all these men in one room I took a good look at my surroundings. The walls were dirty and the paint, which must have had some pigmented colour at one time, was drab and peeling off. There was graffiti everywhere. This graffiti, scratched or painted with who knows what medium, took the form of the names of ex-inmates together with dates and reasons for them being there. The writers could perhaps tell so many stories. Where were they now? Were they still alive? How many of them escaped to tell their tales? I would never know. At least I would not add to this Roll of Dishonour. I was innocent.

In one corner was a large encrusted bucket, which was about the size of a dustbin. This was to be the toilet facilities for all the cell occupants. It was a nauseous sight and I vowed to keep well distanced from it. Against the far wall there were two bed frames, their heads adjacent to the wall. There were no mattresses or bedding on these beds. These pathetic items of furniture represented the cell hierarchy. The only things on them were two burly men who were obviously some sort of "trusties". Elsewhere, there was nothing but men - 100 to 150 of them. All these men had to use only one disgusting slop bucket. There is nothing more certain to cut everyone down to size than the use of

a prison slop bucket. By evening, hours before it's once a day emptying, it was overflowing and stinking.

We were fed once per day with loaves of bread and some watery soup. This was just brought into the cell and the inmates had to elect a committee of prisoners to carry out the delicate task of dividing the food so that all got equal portions. The bread was dark brown in colour of a very soggy constituency, dense and heavy. If it was squeezed it would stay in the shape of the hand like putty. Not the most appetizing food. The only other "meal" was water, which was provided also once per day.

Battery hens have better conditions than those we had to put up with. At least the hens have separate compartments and are reasonably well fed. The relative space per person and the constant noise was not dissimilar. During the day it was a veritable 'Tower of Babel' - and a multitude of different dialects and languages fermented and compounded the confusion. Even at night there was no peace and quiet. A snore, sighs, moans and groans interspersed with occasional nightmare horror screams and shouts.

It was hard for me, coming from a well-fed, clean, hygienic, well-ordered household to adjust to the dirty smelly conditions in that prison. At first I could hardly stomach the bread and soup but eventually the empty belly overcame the other handicaps.

When night came we had to sleep as best we could on the floor. There was no room between bodies when everyone lay down and the only coverings we had were our own clothes. My cousin Gerard and I shared our coats - we put one on the ground and with the other we covered ourselves. Interrogations were always carried out at night. Just as we were settling down to get some sleep the door would open and the guard would call out a name. When our names were called we would be taken out individually and asked the same old questions about our name, where we were from, where we were going, who did we know.

These interrogations were carried out at regular intervals and always followed the same routine. The questions were obviously standard to all interrogators and were merely read parrot fashion to everyone at every interview. No variation, it would seem, was allowed.

The guards had taken all my papers when I was first arrested and so they were well aware of my details. I suppose they were looking for discrepancies in our answers. I had not told them the truth, that I was heading for Romania to join the Polish army, that would have been suicidal and I would have been classed as an enemy spy and either shot or sentenced to a long imprisonment in a Russian Concentration camp. I had given my reason for being over the border in Russia as visiting my aunt. When they asked for my aunt's name I gave them the name of my flying instructor's wife and the address of my flying school which was now in Russian territory. When they asked me details of this aunt I had to make some of them up and commit them to memory for the next interrogation. I kept these details fairly simple and so I got away with this deception. If they had checked up they would have found the house there minus the aunt.

We were not allowed outside the cell apart from these interrogations, nor we given any washing facilities. For two months none of the prisoners in that cell washed and I suppose we grew accustomed to the stench - three hundred unwashed sweaty feet - three hundred unwashed sweaty malodorous armpits. One hundred and fifty sets of dirty, smelly, matted clothing. Not to mention the various other intermittent odours emanating from such a motley lot of underfed windbags. It was in some ways a good thing it was winter and not summer, as I am sure that the cold weather prevented us contracting any disease or illnesses. Gerard and I were lucky to be situated a distance away from the "bucket". Others were not so lucky and had to sleep adjacent to it, where overspills were commonplace and the wooden floor was

impregnated with urine from countless prisoners who had passed this way. The weak didn't go to the wall here - they went to the bucket.

There was very little to occupy us during the long days and it was difficult to conquer the boredom. Some time was spent in talking to other inmates, trying to ascertain what had happened to our acquaintances. As they were not in the cell with us we hoped that they had got away. We feared that they had not and were in other overcrowded stinking cells. Occasionally new inmates arrived, often from other parts of the prison and they were bombarded with questions about their cellmates. This was the only way that any news came in or went out. Often there would be a description or a name that was recognisable and then we would know that a colleague was also in the prison. Occasionally a prisoner from our cell would be taken out for interrogation and would fail to return. Perhaps he had been set free. It could be my turn next.

Shortly after arriving I noticed that the two "trusties" were sitting on their beds, underneath the window, doing something with their clothes. They appeared to be peering intensely at them and picking bits off. I was intrigued. I soon discovered that they were delousing themselves - degradation upon degradation. I made a mental note to keep well out of contact with these men to avoid contamination. I squirmed at the thought. However, it was inevitable that before long I along with everyone else would also be carrying out this exacting chore. Only once during my incarceration in this prison was I taken out to the shower room to wash myself and have my clothes disinfected- some temporary respite from the debugging. It was not long before re-infestation occurred.

Rumours were rife. From these we assumed that we would be transferred to Lvov prison, as this one was getting more and more overcrowded. We half expected that we would be

discharged to either live or work in Russia or handed back to the Occupying Germans. Meanwhile we tried to keep ourselves agile in both mind and body. For exercise we used to "walk the plank". The floor of the cell was made of wooden planks and during each day a space was kept clear for us to take it in turns to walk up and down a portion of the wooden floor. This little area of the floor was polished smooth and shiny with the constant friction of shuffling feet.

There was an attempt at an escape. The two tough guys had their own good reasons for constantly sitting on the beds. One was to show their seniority another was to mask some secret activities. Behind the bed heads they had been systematically loosening the mortar and dismantling the wall brick by brick until they had made a hole big enough to crawl through. Where they intended to go from there, or how they intended to scale the surrounding walls was a mystery. Unfortunately for them, before they could finish the job they were found out (or informed upon - one never can tell what some people will do to ingratiate themselves with the guards or who the authorities may have planted) and their attempt was foiled. To avoid being found out they had been surreptitiously depositing the rubble in the slop bucket, exacerbating its inadequacy. As it was their job to empty this once a day they had covered their tracks fairly well. The bucket with its extra contents was obviously so heavy that they took it no further than the courtyard outside our cell and emptied its contents right underneath the only window. Not only had we to put up with the stench inside, our only source of outside air was also polluted.

We were all transferred to other overcrowded cells whilst the Russians considered what to do with the hole in the wall. There were new people to question about friends and other rumours to discuss. We found that prisoners who we thought had been freed had just been placed in different cells. The occupants of this next

cell included Poles, Ukrainians, Jews and even one Argentinian Pole who had been on holiday with relatives in Poland when hostilities broke out. He had been captured whilst trying to reach Germany. This Argentinian had a cello with him and I would love to hear him play it. The cello has always been one of my favourite instruments with its mellow haunting tones. He never let the precious instrument out of his sight and he even slept clutching it. I was to find out some time later that the cello had been the hiding place for jewellery and valuables, which he had been trying to take with him back home. Unfortunately for him they were discovered and confiscated. Not only did he lose his fortune but also his beautiful cello was smashed up and destroyed by his captors. It always amazed me that people could be so materialistic as to value their possessions above their life. I could not feel sorrow for the Argentinian's hidden hoard, but I was saddened to hear of the cello's demise.

And still the interrogations continued - always at night. Same questions, same order, same remarks. Same answers. What were they hoping to achieve? Eventually the commandants got used to some Polish and we got used to some Russian expressions. The guards who were willing to talk to us and who were as confused as we were about our reasons for being there would tell us, "When we get you sorted out you'll be able to go home." It was taking them a long time to sort us out. The more we questioned newcomers to our cell, the more our hopes of release faded. Our spirits sank bit by bit and we stopped believing the assurances of the guards. We did once have a visit from the Commissar who asked whether there were any complaints. There were. Many. He listened inattentively, going through the motions, but we knew that he had heard them all before and there would be no improvement.

We had resigned ourselves to the fact that we were now in Russia and there was very little we could do about it. We wondered what Russia was really like. There was very little information, which had come out to the outside world. The Rumours circulating at the time were that the people were half civilised. From the little information we could glean from the guards we were still none the wiser. The guards were local and had no information about the rest of the country. They had been told that they were well off and that the people in the Capitalist countries were starving. They wouldn't believe that over the border in Poland there was such a thing as electricity and motorcars.

One man in the cell had been a journalist and a staunch supporter of the Communist Party in Poland. He announced to everyone one day that if the Polish Government wanted to rid the country of communism all it had to do was to send each of the Party members to Russia for six months training. He guaranteed, from his experiences, that they would return home totally disillusioned with the doctrine.

One night, after about two months in this prison, we were woken up and marched outside where there was deep snow on the ground. As soon as the fresh cold air entered my lungs I was taken aback. Everything started spinning round and I had great difficulty in standing up. It took all my effort not to collapse on the ground. I was weaving about like a drunken man. In a short time, as I got used to the clean, cold air and my brain had become accustomed to the unfamiliar influx of oxygen, I looked around and saw that others were also reeling and that some had fainted and were being carried. We were marched out of the prison flanked by guards. After the initial shock it felt good to be in the open air, the crisp white snow under our feet and the chill freshness clinging to our unwashed hands and faces. The forced march ended at the railway line where we were again counted and

with much shouting, pushing and rifle butt nudging loaded into waiting goods wagons. It was here that my cousin Gerard and I were separated and although I was to catch a glimpse of him once I was not able to speak to him again for some considerable time. I suddenly felt very lonely. I had not until this time realised what comfort we had afforded each other. My link with home and family had been whisked away from me. Only strangers in a strange environment surrounded me. Parents, brother, sister, cousins, aunts and uncles suddenly seemed further away than ever, unreachable.

We stayed locked in these wagons in the stationery train all the rest of that night. It was obvious that we were going somewhere but no one told us where. We could only guess. At least conditions couldn't be much worse than those we had just left. Again there was hope that we would be set free when we reached our destination. Maybe we would have some kind of trial where we would be able to convince them of our innocence. Whatever the outcome change had to be better than stagnation. As daylight broke the train shuddered, the wheels screeched against the icy iron rails, turned first in slow motion clanking discordantly, then gathering speed, revolving faster and faster until the rhythm settled down into a hypnotic pulsating beat. We were on our way and heading east.

The wagons were fairly large, totally enclosed and with a small stove in the middle which stretched from floor to roof. These wagons were as crowded as our previous premises. We were given some fuel to burn in the stove, which served to keep the centre of the wagon warm but did not permeate to the sides of the wagon. The perimeter walls remained covered in frost. Some people managed to escape from these wagons although they were well and truly locked from the outside. They exited through the floor. A piece of metal was heated up in the stove and used to burn a ring of holes in the floor thus dislodging a suitably sized

piece of wood making it possible for a man to drop through down on to the track. Once on the track all that was required was to lay flat until the train had passed. However, if you made it on to the track you still had to brave the gunfire of the guards if spotted. There were those who obviously felt that it was worth the risk. Some prisoners possibly gained their freedom this way. The sudden braking of the train and the subsequent rifle shots echoing in the quiet countryside vividly demonstrated that there were also those whose only freedom was in death.

We had not been travelling for long when we all complained about our skin itching. We looked around and tried to find the cause. This soon became evident. The wagons we were in had been previously used for transporting salt - the only commodity in plentiful supply in Russia - and the residue from the last consignment still clung to the interior surfaces of the wagon. Once we had located the cause of our discomfort we set about sweeping it up with whatever utensil we could lay our hands on. This gave us something on which to concentrate and our suffering was also alleviated.

We expected our destination would be Lvov prison but in this we were mistaken. The train stopped in some sidings. This was Kiev. The guards unlocked the trucks and we were allowed to get out and stretch our legs. High fences surrounded the sidings, which contained another goods train, as well as the one we had just vacated. Here we were put to work. The job was to take potatoes from an underground warehouse and load them onto the goods wagons of the other train in the sidings. It was good to be out in the open air with the limited amount of freedom to wander about within the compound. Our sleeping quarters for the next three nights was the underground warehouse and this accommodation was the best we had seen for several months. There was plenty of space and it was reasonably warm. We were

sorry when the work was completed and we were loaded on to the train once more to continue our journey.

As we travelled further and further south the weather got warmer and warmer. What had started as an uncomfortable cold, cramped journey turned into one that was still uncomfortable, but sweaty, sticky and hot.

CHAPTER 13

Several days later the train pulled into sidings at Odessa, a busy port on the northern shore of the Black Sea. It was early summer and very hot. We gathered up our belongings and after the usual head count we were loaded on to lorries accompanied by armed guards and transported to the prison.

The prison at Odessa was a more modern building and had been purpose built. There were several four or five storey rectangular buildings. Between each building was a small yard encompassed with 3 metre high walls. Built in to the top of these walls, glinting menacingly in the bright sunshine, were thousands of pieces of pointed, broken glass.

After we had suffered the counting and searching procedures, we were fingerprinted and photographed. When I saw the results of this photography later I could not recognise myself. I hadn't seen my face in a mirror for some time and I was astounded at the ravages the last few months had wrought. I looked years older, ragged and haggard. As each of these tasks was completed we were marched, prodded, butted, into one of the stark, rectangular prison buildings. I expect that each of the buildings were built with a similar configuration. On one of the shorter ends of the building was a bare wall. At the other short end was a large window which reminded me of a church's east window but glazed with plain glass. Down each of the long sides were rows of cells, about twenty each side. A walkway with an iron balustrade went all the way round the perimeter of an empty space that reached from floor to roof. The only obstructions within this space were safety nets, which prevented inmates from injuring themselves or from committing suicide. One does not expect a prison to be other than stark and bare. Odessa prison lived up to our expectations. Its hollow echoing sounds stomped out a discordant forbidding air, which did little to raise our flagging spirits.

The cells each measured about 6' by 11' and had a door to the inside and a small barred window high up facing to the outside. On the outside of this window was a wooden trough covering the lower half of it, which prevented anyone, looking downward. The top part of the window could be opened slightly to let air in. Inside the cell was a small wooden cabinet, which contained wooden dishes and wooden spoons for the prisoners to use for their food. On top of this cabinet was a container for drinking water. There was also a slop bucket in the cell to be used for urinating. A central heating radiator, which did not work but for which we eventually found a use, was fixed to the wall. The walls were painted, but dirty and covered in graffiti - some of the dates recorded went back many years. In the heavy wooden door was the customary spy hole used by the guards and above the door an opening housing an electric light, which shone both inside and outside the cell and which burned constantly day and night.

Our beds were the floors. Occasionally there would be thin mattresses, but more often than not there was nothing. In fact as we were to find out very shortly the mattress could be more of a menace, housing all manner of creepy crawlies - some innocuous and some not so innocuous. Being summer the weather was warm so we had no need of blankets to cover us even if we had been given any. There were 11 men in our cell and when we lay down to sleep at night this could only be managed by lying across the room alternately top to tail.

It was not long before we discovered the biggest scourge of this prison. Whichever cell we were in (and we were moved about fairly regularly) we had to contend with the nightly march of the bed bugs. They emerged every night in their thousands. From the walls, from the floor, under the door, up the side of the central heating pipes. Hungry for blood, anybody's blood, they set their course for the nearest available exposed skin in the

anticipation of a banquet. We had enough trouble keeping the blood that we possessed coursing round our under-nourished bodies and were very reluctant to lose even a drop to this vile marauding insect. So we spent a great deal of time before laying down to sleep killing them by squashing them against the walls, the door, the floor, in fact wherever we could catch them. The offensive smell that emanated from their crushed bodies will remain with me forever, but this was the lesser of two evils. Blood stained, smelly walls against bodies bedevilled with bites. It seemed as if all the bed bugs in the whole world had congregated in that prison and were out to suck us dry for although we slaughtered them one night, there were always as many again to swell their ranks the following night. It became almost an obsession trying to outwit them. We even tried to reduce the numbers coming in by using some of our precious bread ration to stuff up all the holes in the wall and round the radiator pipes - but to no avail. The nightly invasion of the bed bugs continued. It is said that you can get used to anything. But none of us ever tolerated the bed bugs and their eradication was one of the daily distasteful tasks we carried out with gusto.

For each of the twenty cells there were two toilet rooms. Stepping into one of these rooms you were confronted by a concrete floor sloping from all four sides towards a central channel. In the middle of this channel was an open pipe and this was the main sewer pipe. There was also a water tap for washing or for flushing purposes. It was rather reminiscent of a cowshed and no doubt it was built on the same principle. All the excrement and urine could be easily flushed down the available sewer pipe. When we needed to use the toilet room, the customary way of attracting the guard's attention was by rattling and banging on the cell door. Eventually a guard would appear. At times things could be getting quite desperate before he appeared. The guard had to escort us to the toilet area, wait for us to finish and escort

us back to the cell. Life was certainly not a bed of roses for any of us including our warders.

It wasn't long before we discovered that the open sewer pipe in the toilet room went the whole of the way up and down the building. With a little bit of ingenuity the pipe could be used to communicate with other prisoners above and below. We arranged to be there at certain times so that we could ask and get answers to our questions regarding the whereabouts of friends and relatives in other parts of the prison. Rumours of what may be happening on the outside were greedily received and any information true or false was passed around the prison blocks in this fashion. The defunct radiators in our cells were also used as mediums to communicate with others. Morse code was a very handy language to know in these circumstances. The only other communication we had with fellow inmates was on the walkway as we were being accompanied to the toilet at the same time as they were returning. It was forbidden to speak to other prisoners at this time, but that did not stop us, and when the guards shouted at us to be quiet we took no notice. Although we lingered as long as we could outside the cell the time for conversation could be counted in seconds rather than minutes. There wasn't really very much to talk about most of the time, but whatever news there was found its way quickly round the whole block.

It would have been easy to lose track of time. No radios, only scarce Russian newspapers with strange looking print which could be deciphered by only a few, and even these were only available when the guards felt generous enough to pass them on - not very often as newsprint was used by the guards for rolling tobacco to make their cigarettes. Nevertheless, we maintained some accuracy by asking the guards, who were usually willing to oblige, if we couldn't scrounge these discarded newspapers.

We managed by various methods to make sizable holes in the wooden trough outside the window and we also managed to loosen the small opening window until it was eventually removed altogether. As the weather was warm it was a bonus to have a constant stream of air coming in the cell. We did not ask for the window to be repaired or replaced. By standing on each other's shoulders it was possible to look out of this opening and it was also easier to enlarge the holes in the trough. These holes were now large enough for us to see down to the yard but not large enough to be easily visible from the ground. We could shout to prisoners below or in the opposite block, have conversations or pass messages. Being skinny and lightweight I was the natural choice for balancing on more substantial shoulders to carry out these chats. An appropriate sized lookout kept his ear to the door. If footsteps were heard near the cell door he would stand in a suitable position to block the sight line between the peephole and the window until an innocent position was resumed. It all helped to pass the time. It all helped to maintain sanity. It all helped to exercise the mind. Some guards would rattle the peephole cover to let us know they were there, but others would carry out the process very quietly. There were good and bad amongst them all, but overall they had no axe to grind.

Food was brought to us by long serving Russian prisoners. The bread was meticulously weighed into individual portions and the soup, which could not be classified, always tasted of fish. I suppose, Odessa being a port, fish was plentiful and cheap. This was our only meal of the day. At another time of the day hot water was also brought, occasionally with lumps of sugar. As we were unsure of the purpose of this sugar we asked the guards and discovered that the Russian way of drinking tea was to put a lump of sugar in the mouth and sip the tea (or hot water in our case), through the sugar.

There were three guards to each floor and they often sat by the big window on a seat, eating their meal or smoking. They were not much better fed than the prisoners were and most of them were reasonable people. However, they were fair game to us. If we could get one over on them it made our day. The favourite sport was causing a distraction when being escorted to the toilet and, whilst the guards were occupied with the disturbance, we would steal their food, newspapers or cigarettes. At times the guards would stub out their cigarette on the floor and then there would be a scramble to retrieve this. Occasionally half a cigarette would be dropped - I think they felt sorry for us - they were aware of our "misdemeanours" and couldn't understand the reasons for us being in prison. Tobacco acquired was always shared with all inmates in the cell and wrapping the oddments of tobacco in scraps of the thin Russian newsprint made cigarettes. The Russian guards were also desperate for anything that came from the west and would trade food and tobacco for the slightest thing. We had very little left to trade. Our worn out shoes were very much sought after.

We were allowed exercise in the yard on a few occasions. It was customary for anyone allowed out to pick up anything which might be lying around - a piece of wire, a piece of wood or metal - as a needle could be made from a piece of wire and a knife from wood or metal. Anything we found we would hide in the cell for future use. Every so often the guards would search the cell and anything they found would be confiscated. However, most of the time we were too cute for them.

The other times we were allowed out of the cell were when we went for a haircut. The barber cut all our hair off and any beards or moustaches were shaved off. It was one way of keeping down the lice. Very occasionally we were given some brown soap and allowed to go to the toilet area to wash ourselves. The only time I saw a shower was when I first arrived. We were told

to take our clothes off, lined up and sent through a room where, running across the ceiling was a pipe with holes in it. The water emanating from these holes was warm and comforting and there was a temptation to wallow in the luxury of this makeshift shower. However, the wallowing was short-lived. Anyone lingering too long found that the water was turned to cold very quickly. When we passed through the door at the far end of this room our clothes were returned to us. These had obviously been disinfected by some heat treatment, as the metal buttons were extremely hot to the touch.

Once again there were the interrogations. Always carried out at night. Prisoners were woken up and marched to the commandant's office in another smaller block. The commandant would sit behind a desk and ask the same old questions time and time again. He often threatened to beat you up, but never did, as it was not allowed. He tried to get you to contradict your previous story. The language used was Russian and so for me was difficult to understand. However, it worked to my advantage at times, as if the Commandant found some discrepancy in my story I could always plead that the previous interrogator had misunderstood my Polish or that I did not understand the question. Sometimes he would smoke half a cigarette and pass the remainder to you. Some of the interrogators were sadists but some were good and they were all nearly as badly off as we were. Even if the prisoner had not had any sleep because of these interrogations he was not allowed to lie down during the daytime. The guards were on constant look out for infringements of this rule. Psychologically this was to wear down the resistance of inmates so that "confessions" would be made. However, in such closely packed cells, it was always possible to fool the guards and we were quite adept at sleeping in a sitting position. Therefore, the psychology was ill conceived in this crowded accommodation. I suppose it served to amuse and occupy the bored officers on night patrol.

To pass the time we talked, played games, and as there was a Library, some of us read. I decided to learn the Russian language so I borrowed a book from the library and a Ukrainian butcher in my cell was my tutor. I was determined to master it so that I could be aware of what the Russians were saying. I also felt that before long I would be set free and would need to find my way about and out of Russia. We also made a set of dominoes - we each saved a bit of bread and when we had enough we squeezed it all together into a ball of soft dough. We divided this into pieces, moulded it into shape and left it to harden. We passed some considerable hours in this pastime until one day, unfortunately, one of the guards on a routine search found them and confiscated them. We didn't risk any of our meagre bread rations again.

Any cigarette ends found were carefully re-rolled in newspaper to form a passable cigarette. Striking a flint on glass or metal and igniting some charcoal made from burnt cotton lighted this. It was an unwritten law that a cigarette was a communal commodity to be shared by all but food belonged to the individual. As was bound to happen the day came when we had no flints left between us. Looking round for an alternative method of manufacturing sparks, I came up with a bright idea. With a piece of wire made into a U shape and with the ends covered with cotton wadding I could short circuit the electrical light fitting thus causing a spark which would cause the cotton to burn. Carefully, so as not to be seen by the guards I tested my theory on the only electric light available, the one above the door. Success. Sighs of relief. We had come to rely on the tobacco that more than anything else bonded us together in our otherwise miserable existence. This method of ignition turned out to be a very satisfactory if highly dangerous one. Eventually our luck ran out and one evening when we were about this business every light in the block went out - total and absolute darkness. Shouting and

rattling of cell doors. Hurried footsteps accompanied by curses as guards bumped into each other. Pandemonium. No one but us knew what had caused the lights to fuse and no one ever found out. We were cock-a-hoop. Once more we felt we had put one over on the guards. All too soon the lights were restored and the questioning and head counts began. Everyone wanted to know what had happened. We were just as assiduous in our questioning as every one else. The bad news was that we dared not continue the practice.

During my stay at Odessa Prison I experienced the "cooler" for two days. I can't remember exactly what my crime was, but I expect I was caught stealing from the guards. I was hauled up in front of the commandant and given two days solitary. Solitary - a small cell, completely bare with no windows, no light, not even the usual hole above the door. The door clanged shut with a ring of finality. I was alone. Everything went black. Try as I might I could see nothing. I rubbed my eyes. Still nothing. Total blackness. It was as if I had suddenly gone blind. The floor was solid concrete, hard and cold. I gathered my wits together and tried to acclimatise myself. Feeling round the walls to familiarise myself with my surroundings I completely lost all sense of direction. After a initial moment of blind panic I took some deep breaths and tried to work out a strategy for sanity. The only thing to be done was to sit on the floor and wait. The silence was deafening. I could at least hear my own breathing and my heartbeat was as loud as the ticking of a grandfather clock. I tried to count the seconds, then the minutes, but this only seemed to emphasise the dragging, funereal slow-motion passage of time. I had no food during my period of 'solitary'. I saw no one - not even a guard. Every minute procrastinated, as if bored with allowing the sand of time to trickle through the hourglass neck just so that it could be reversed to parody a parallel process. I closed my eyes. I tried to sleep away the time. I dozed. I slept.

But for how long? A minute? An hour? A few seconds? It was difficult to tell. I woke up cold and shivering. Everything that I had ever done wrong plagued my mind. Long forgotten hurtful and cruel things that had been said or done to me during my life invaded my thoughts and try as I might to defeat them and banish them to some less prominent corner of my consciousness, they would not retreat. Had I died and gone to hell? If there is such a place as hell then this is what my personal hell must surely be like. Two days - two weeks - two years - a lifetime. Had they forgotten about me and deserted the prison? Was this to be my fate - to be abandoned in this black hole? When I heard the cell door open I was uncertain whether it was real or a dream. The light that began as a chink became a blinding wall. I tried to walk towards the light but stumbled, as my legs buckled like a drunkard. The figure in front of me was a blur. It took time to re-adjust my focus.

When I rejoined my fellow inmates they reassured me that I had only been gone for two days. I vowed I would never willingly cause myself to have that experience again.

One day an official came to our cell accompanied by the guards and instead of the usual headcount he called out my name and number. As he did this he also called out my sentence. The understanding of what he said did not strike home immediately but when it did I was devastated. No judge, no representations, guilty of what crime I knew not.

"Krupa, Marian Jan, by the kindness of Joe Stalin and our beloved Russia a lenient sentence of two years hard labour."

The others in the cell were similarly called and summarily sentenced. Then the cell door was slammed shut and locked and the officials carried on dispensing their 'good news' to other inmates.

To say that I did not fully understand the implications of this sentence that kept echoing in my thoughts is an understatement. 'Two years hard labour.' There was a feeling of relief that I would be out of prison. 'Two years hard labour.' So what if I had to do some work. Work did not frighten me. 'Two years hard labour.' It would be in a camp. My idea of a camp must have been of some kind of holiday camp. 'Two years hard labour.' How little I knew.

We expected something to happen either that day or the next. Nothing that day. Nothing the next. For several days the same routines. What was happening? When we got chance, we questioned those guards who we knew to be reasonably approachable as to what was really going on. When would we be moving out? We must have conveyed to them our relief at getting out of prison because they warned us, "You don't know how well off you have been here - we are very sorry for you - you have no inkling of what you are heading for. You'll soon wish you were back."

CHAPTER 14

Within a few days preparations started. We were marched into the main courtyard and as we were being assembled I was elated when I caught a glimpse of my cousin Gerard.

Unfortunately I was not near enough to speak to him. At least I knew he was still alive. He saw me and we waved. We were then loaded on to lorries, taken back to the railway sidings at Odessa and loaded on to cattle trucks. These were the same kind of trucks as the ones in which we had arrived at Odessa.

I had been in Odessa prison for about four and a half months. I was now eighteen years old. I had learned the basics of the Russian language. I had learned something of the Russian mentality. I had experienced squalor and deprivation, loneliness and friendship, hope and fear. In less than a year my carefree youth had disappeared and my involuntary initiation into full maturity had taken but a few very long months.

From Odessa we were transported by rail in these cattle trucks accompanied by guards with machine guns, rifles and dogs. There was little point in attempting an escape as there was nowhere to run to. We would be caught if we were lucky and shot if we were not. The journey was painfully slow and the train had to stop at regular intervals for feeding and toilet drills. Our toilets were the fields and hedgerows along the route with the ever-watchful guards guarding our backsides. And, the inevitable counting.

The countryside that we saw on our journey between Odessa and Moscow was truly impressive. We saw rocky, mountainous terrain as portrayed in the American western films. There were few roads and fewer signs of civilisations but magnificent scenery. I was truly impressed. Maybe Russia wasn't such a bad country after all. I didn't dwell too long on what the future held. I tried to put it to the back of my mind. Maybe the tales of labour

camps had been exaggerated. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad. Two years would soon pass. Maybe the war would be over and I could go home. Perhaps I could get to France or Britain. The future in my imagination looked bright.

It took at least a week (one loses some sense of days when all you have to listen to is the clanking of the wheels over the track) to reach Moscow. Here we were disembarked and taken to Lubyanka Prison. The purpose of this stop was to sort out our ultimate destinations and our stay lasted around two weeks. Lubyanka prison was much cleaner and the architecture was more interesting. Not so many straight lines. The cells were similar in size and we were still packed like sardines, but at least there were no bed bugs. We were questioned and our identity was once more checked, but there were none of the usual interrogations.

One prison is very much like another in Russia and the food allocation is standard throughout the country. Therefore, our stay in Moscow added very little variation to our previous prison existence. Those who seemed to be in the know were extremely unhappy about entering Lubyanka prison as it had the reputation of being the place where one only came out feet first. If Odessa had the bugs, Lubyanka had the exterminators.

We were relieved that this had only been a transitory stop. We had no wish to test out the prison's reputation. Again we were loaded on the train to set off to some unknown (to us) destination. We were not told anything about our allotted camps and it was difficult to know in which direction we were travelling. I remember the train stopping at a place called Kotlas where we stayed in a siding for the night before continuing our journey. It had taken us about a week to get here from Moscow. The scenery was in sharp contrast to that which we had recently experienced, being forests, small scrubland and marshland. The railway line was elevated on an embankment and there was no visible horizon, the land being flat and uninteresting as far as the eye could see. I

had to change the opinion of my previously perceived Russia. It had become inhospitable and bleak, barren and menacing. There could be no joy or hope living in a land such as this. I even stopped peeping through the holes in the wagon sides at this miserable, god-forsaken land. We all sat in a pessimistic stupor having no expectations of anything nice in store for us in this unfriendly terrain. We were not aware of any appreciable changes in temperature as eighty bodies in one wagon were an extremely efficient regulating factor, but it must have been getting colder. The further we travelled the lower our spirits sank.

Eventually, totally dejected, we arrived at the end of the line - wherever that was - and realised that the air was cold. We were again loaded into open lorries. One guard sat on top of the lorry's cab and another sat at the back of the truck. They were at least dressed for the weather with their fur coats and hats. We were still sporting the rags with which we had left home, or at least those which had not been bartered or stolen in Odessa prison. We travelled all day through forests of weak leafless trees whose puny trunks hadn't the strength to grow more than about 3 metres in height. Apart from the odd clearing this was our horizon for the whole of that day's journey. We stopped overnight at a transit camp where we were fed with the usual watery soup and bread and where we slept on wooden benches in long huts. We repeated a similar journey the following day through similar forests and staying in similar overnight accommodation. It was necessary to hold tight to any little possession you might have as prisoners in the transit camps were eager to acquire any little 'luxury' and would rob you if they got the chance. Anything western, even rags, were commodities for barter.

The following day there was no transport. We were lined up and set off walking still through forests of weak leafless trees. I could see now that we numbered about 200 ragged individuals. Two armed guards with a dog led the march and there were armed

guards to the right and left at intervals along the weary subdued column. Two armed guards with a dog brought up the rear- a total of twenty guards and two dogs.

"Two paces either right or left means instant death." barked the guards. At mealtime we were allowed to squat in the centre of the road to eat our bread. The road was reasonable comprising of a stony base covered with sand. It could be hard on the feet if your footwear was worn out or flimsy. We walked all through that day. By nightfall we arrived at our destination that we discovered was called Pechora.

Outside the camp were many buildings and assembling outside one of them we were told to take off our clothes and wrap them in a bundle. These were then taken away. Inside this building was a primitive shower of the sort I have previously described. This was most welcoming after the forced march but lingering in its warmth, attractive though this seemed, was discouraged by an influx of icy cold water. Our clothes, duly disinfected by heat, were returned to us on leaving the shower and we donned them quickly in the sharp night air.

Once again we were counted - quite unnecessarily - none of us had the strength to run anywhere - lined up and marched into the camp, allocated to temporary barracks, given hot water and bread and mercifully allowed to sleep in our new lodgings.

CHAPTER 15

The camp was located in this vast forest of small trees far from any civilization. At least the accommodation had already been built. Many of the prisoners in labour camps started with no shelter other than tents. Part of their job was to clear the site, cut the logs and erect the fences and buildings. Pechora district was in the far north of the Russian continent and stretched as far as the Arctic Circle. The main industries in this almost uninhabited region were coal mining, tree felling and oil drilling. No ordinary workers could be persuaded to voluntarily take on the jobs in this harsh and inhospitable part of the state. Russia needed the commodities and so the Labour Camps were set up, manned by the thousands of prisoners who were recruited occasionally via the courts and more often summarily as we had been, and whose offences were both real and imaginary.

This camp and the others through which we had passed reminded me of a red indian stockade. The perimeter fence was made of close fitting rough wooden stakes at least 3 metres high. At each of the four corners was a small hut like structure on long stilts where the armed guards oversaw the camp and from where high-powered searchlights beamed during the hours of darkness. Cleared ground on the outside of this fence totally surrounded the camp and this was patrolled twenty-four hours a day by guards and their dogs. There was an entrance gate suitable for allowing large contingents of men and lorries to enter or leave. There was also a small door, which was used by the guards when they were coming on or going off duty. Just inside the gate was the guardhouse through which everyone had to pass when entering or leaving the camp.

Inside the camp was a smaller perimeter fence, about half a metre in height and about 1 metre away from the main fence. The

area between these two fences was no mans land and you risked being shot without warning if you dared to set foot on it. In the centre of the camp was a two-storey building, which contained the administration block. This was also topped off with a powerful searchlight. Other buildings of various sizes were the sleeping quarters. All the accommodation huts were constructed of logs with several glazed windows and one door. The inside of the sleeping quarters varied slightly according to size. The larger ones had what can only be described as a long wooden shelf down each side raised up from the floor, which served as the beds. Smaller shacks had individual bed shelves. Heating was by either one or two wood burning stoves and there were electric lights. Each cabin had a small vestibule containing a wooden tub of drinking water and each man had a wooden bowl and wooden spoon. There was no bedding of any kind and prisoners had to rely on their clothes for warmth.

The first day in our new home we were allocated our prisoners clothes, which were supposed to be suitable for the climate. We were really pleased to get these clothes as it was getting extremely cold. Russian caps made of two layers of cotton with padding inside and with ear flaps which could be either pulled down over the ears or fastened on top of the hat; Jackets and trousers made out of the same type of material and padding which were easily torn and so invariably patched and darned; Roughly shaped pigskin mittens; Rectangles of flannelette about 2 ft long whose use puzzled us until we found out that they were for wrapping round the feet as a substitute for socks. Footwear comprised of compressed felt roughly shaped like a wellington boot and suitable for all sizes and shapes of feet. These were passable in dry weather but useless in wet. For the wet weather the issue was what can only be described as primitive galoshes, also of only one size for all, obviously fabricated out of old lorry tyres with the tread removed. They were either stitched or riveted

into shape. This was our total kit. We were allowed to keep our own clothes and these came in very useful as extra warmth under the kit and as bedding during the cold nights.

When we donned our prison clothes everyone looked the same. The only thing that differentiated our uniforms from the guards was the colour. Ours were blue that soon faded to grey and the guards wore khaki green. Those guards on guard duty in the open-air sported long loose fur coats drawn together in the middle sometimes with a belt but more often with string. The triangular hammer and sickle insignia was prominently displayed on their caps. They also carried rifles.

This was the first time we Poles had been exposed to Russian prisoners. Some of them were murderers, some were political prisoners and it was essential for us to watch our step as the violent Russians tried to hold the upper hand and it could be suicidal to enter into an argument with them. They also, because they were long-term prisoners, tried to keep in well with the guards by offering goods, which they had stolen from other inmates. Luckily for us these Russian prisoners were in the minority in this camp.

Besides the Russians there were also some Finns working there and four or five Russian women who worked in the laboratory. The women were housed in a separate zone, which was fenced off from the rest of the camp. The Poles decided among themselves that these women were out of bounds as they probably had V.D. Not that there was much danger of us testing this theory out in our state of mind and body. It wasn't long before the women were removed from the camp and their accommodation opened up and allocated to relieve some of the worst overcrowded barracks.

I soon found out what work was carried out in this camp - quarrying, timber felling and some kind of manufacturing process. Other jobs available in the camp were engineer, joiner, plumber,

blacksmith, transport, electrician. We were taken to the admin block and questioned on our capabilities. I said I knew something about engineering and was sent to another part of the block to be interviewed by the Chief Engineer. I did know some aspects of engineering from my short apprenticeship as a draughtsman and what I didn't know I bluffed. I had very quickly figured out that this would be one of the less physical occupations and would be an inside job more often than not. With my slight build and weakened condition caused by my recent incarceration I knew that I could not last very long quarrying or timber felling. In these jobs prisoners had to attain a norm (a measured amount of work) which was more often than not set very high. The food received was calculated by your norm. The less you did the less food you got. The less food you got, the less work you could do - a vicious circle that could only end in sickness and eventually death. I was lucky. I was recommended as a plumber - whether this was because of my knowledge or because of my youth I do not know. All I do know was that I found the swarthy, dark-skinned Russian Chief Engineer (Murzyn) a very fair man.

The boss of the plumbing and heating section, a stocky Russian named Grysza, then interviewed me. Here again I was lucky, as I was selected for the job. There were eight of us - the boss, three assistants, 2 boiler men and their assistants. We were now allocated to our 'permanent' huts.

The elite job of the camp was lorry driving because you were allowed to travel long distances and opportunities were there for black marketing. The drivers could sell anything to Russians, especially if it came from the west, and get in exchange other commodities (mainly food and tobacco) that could then be bartered amongst the prisoners for yet further goods to sell on the outside. The Russian convicts who tended to be well in with the Russian guards who no doubt got their cut from the illegal trafficking mainly held these driving jobs.

Each hut housed prisoners from the same work type. We were not confined to our own huts and could visit other huts within the confines of the camp. As the majority of prisoners in the camp were Poles we visited each other regularly in our spare time and often talked of home and mutual acquaintances. We avoided as far as possible the Russian criminals (many of whom were in the transport hut) as they were often violent and would rob you as soon as look at you. In the Engineering Hut half were Russian and half were Polish and each nationality slept alongside their own compatriots at opposite ends of the building.

There was a library of sorts in the Admin building but none of us could spare the mental effort required to read. Everyone conserved as much energy as possible and it was rare to see anyone rushing about. It was as much as we could do to shuffle along to another hut to talk to friends.

Karol, who I had first met when we were loading potatoes in Kiev, was given the job as electrician in the Engineering Section. He knew as much about electricity as I did about plumbing. He had been a student at Lvov Cadet Training Academy and had come from a military family. His father had, unfortunately, committed suicide as a result of some scandal. Karol was about the same age as me, and we shared some of the same interests. He was a confirmed military man and I was set on being a pilot. Discipline had been his whole life and he thrived on it. It was fairly natural that we became close friends sharing the same double bunk in the hut, and sharing our tobacco. He even at one time shared his scabies with me. I discovered that he had been to stay in Krakow at some time with a fellow student. That fellow student was the son of the deaf woman I had rescued from the well. I may even have met him before without realising it.

One Polish Jew was determined to get a job lorry driving which was monopolised by Russian hard criminals. He ingratiated himself by working as an assistant to the drivers

hoping they would recommend the Chief Engineer to take him on as a driver. As an assistant he lodged in the drivers hut. However, the Russians must have been aware that the Jewish man had something of value. No doubt he had boasted about it so that he would be accepted. One night we were awoken by shouting and screaming of "murder" and the Pole ran out of the hut shouting that he was being murdered. It transpired that during the night the Russian drivers had crept up on him while he was asleep, thrown his own coat over him, bundled it round him very tight and robbed him of his treasure. His 'valuables' were his gold teeth, which had been extracted at some time and were hidden in his coat lining. Eventually the guards came to investigate and of course all the Russians were feigning sleep. When questioned, one said he vaguely remembered seeing someone sneak into the hut and approach the boy's bed, but he had taken no notice as he thought it must be one of his friends. The guards could not disprove this and so that matter was dropped. The Russian drivers had what they wanted. The Pole lost not only his 'treasure' but also his chance of a driving job, as he dared not re-enter the transport hut. He had accused the drivers of robbing him and his safety amongst them was highly questionable. His own greed had made him incautious and his loose tongue had cost him his valuables. It was a lesson to us all. Do not trust a Russian in a labour camp. Keep a close watch on any possessions - nothing was too small, too ragged or too insignificant to be coveted. It was far safer to stick together with your own kind.

Homosexuality did not exist among the Poles as far as I am aware - we were too under-nourished. I recall one of the Odessa Prison Guards telling us when they knew we were going to Concentration Camps

"You will probably live - but you'll never want to shag again".

There was some homosexuality among the Russians although they had to be careful and only practise with consent as this was a

punishable offence and the guards would come down heavy on anyone caught. We avoided being alone with a Russian as far as possible. There was strength in sticking together. As the Russians were in the minority in this camp they tended to leave us be and not act as bullyboys as they did in other camps.

Hot water was only for drinking. It was much too precious to waste on washing. Cleansing of hands and face was carried out outside the barracks with cold water. But it was possible to warm it by taking a mouthful, holding it there for a few moments and then spitting it out on to your soaped hands. The soap issued was a brown jelly-like substance, which lathered up with the warmed water. Extra foot wrappings, fairly easily obtained from the stores, could be used as towels. Our bodies may have been reasonably clean but our clothes were never washed. Vessels for carrying the water were fashioned out of old tin cans, which had contained cooking substances and had been discarded. It is surprising what could be made in the Engineering shop from old tin cans - knives, dishes, boxes etc. These could be sold or bartered for other commodities around the camp. The timber workers would, for a knife or a dish, exchange mushrooms, which they had gathered in the forest. Food, any food, however nourishing was the most precious commodity and obtaining more of it was our main obsession. Any reasonably intelligent person had to be aware that with the starvation rations issued none of us would survive. The mushrooms collected by the timber men helped to fill a corner of our bellies and when mixed in hot water made passable soup. The timber workers would use the knives to carve objects out of wood. The objects could then be exchanged for other goods (ultimately some kind of food).

The guards sounded reveille (a piece of suspended rail being struck by a rod) at daybreak. We would get up and go to the cookhouse for hot water to drink and if we had saved any bread from the previous day this would be our breakfast. The timber,

quarry and factory workers would then muster on the large open space in front of the admin block and any daily orders would be given. Every day the guards would warn that anyone stepping out of line would be shot.

"Two steps right or two steps left you will shot without further warning".

There was no doubt that this threat would be carried out.

The workshop people went about their daily duties without any guard. We had to pass through the guardroom when leaving or entering the camp and normally used the small door instead of the large gates. We were not under as strict a surveillance as the outside gangs but there was no chance of escape. There was nowhere to escape to. We would soon be missed. We had no papers. One couldn't travel very far in Russia without official identity documents.

The camp and work sites were in a clearing with a small river which had deep sloping banks running through it. This small river ran into a larger river, which flowed at right angles to it. On the same side as the enclosed camp, and near to it, were the guards' quarters, the stables, the joiners shop, the laundry and stores, and further away on the banks of the main river was the factory. A road from the camp took you over a bridge on the small river and on this side were sited the electricity station, engineering shop, lorry garage and repairs shop, blacksmith, fuel stores, and near the main river were the boiler house, the plumbing workshop and a small factory. Between the boiler house and the factory the steam pipes had to cross the small river that had steep sloping banks. The joiners made a wooden box like structure held up by wooden supports spanning the U shaped valley. The plumbers then had to install the pipes in this wooden box, and insulate them with wood shavings. The joiners then put a lid on the box. This was quite a substantial structure, as it had to bear the weight of the steam pipes and also the maintenance men.

The water for the factory and for the boilers was pumped from the main river and steam and water were essential for the factory to function. The fuel for the boilers was wood, which was brought from the timber site by horse and cart. The boilers had to be kept up to pressure at all times and often in winter with the temperatures sometimes down to - 45°F this became a losing battle.

The factory took in crushed stones from the quarry and loaded them into large wooden tanks about 1 metre high and 4 Metres Square. The tanks were then filled with cold water by a hosepipe the water being pumped from the river. This water was heated to a specific temperature, which was somewhat below boiling point, by a different hosepipe bearing steam. When this temperature was reached, the stirring commenced. With stout wooden poles the workers would agitate the stones until they were thoroughly mixed with the hot water. The mixture was then left to settle. As there were 3 of these tanks the men would then start the process again in the next tank. There was no time for slacking as the 'norm' had to be met. When the mixture had settled, floating on top would be a thick black substance, which was then scooped off with a tool consisting of a wooden frame with hessian stretched across it. This black oily substance was loaded into trays and taken to the drying room beneath the factory and it ended up as a fine black powder. This was put into barrels and taken away by the lorries. The 'norm' was a specific number of barrels filled. The remaining sludge was drained out of the tank into waiting hand wagons and emptied at the side of the factory in a gully.

Everyone's food ration depended on them fulfilling their 'norm'. If you did as much work as your 'norm' then you got 500 gm of bread and some watery soup. If you did more work than your norm then you got more bread, but if you did not reach your norm then you got less bread. Men would congregate near the

cookhouse area and there would be a mad scramble when the rubbish was thrown out. Any rotting scraps or potato parings were immediately snatched up and either eaten immediately or taken away to make soup by combining them with hot water. Vultures tearing at a rotting corpse could not have been more diligent or thorough than the cookhouse scavengers. Survival of the fittest meant survival of the better fed.

My allocated job was to help maintain the boiler and pipe system. There was no 'norm' for us, as we had to do what was necessary. There was no way at that time to quantify maintenance work. This did not mean that our work was any the easier. There were times when it worked to our advantage but there were also times when we were extremely disadvantaged. We had to cut and thread steel pipes, install new systems; check constantly for leaks and either tighten joints or lay new pipes. We worked from dawn until dusk 6 days a week. There were two boilers, one smaller than the other, and in winter both had to be utilised to keep up the pressure. All the equipment used, was second hand and often had to be adapted. Everything was makeshift but it had to work as efficiently as possible in order to keep the factory running. In winter (which was at least six months of the year here) it was difficult to keep everything up and running and the work was hard and demanding. It was as much as our bodies would allow us to do to eat our meagre rations and put ourselves to bed after our days work. Socialising was left to rest days.

We were paid a few roubles once a month and with these we could buy whatever the 'shop' on the camp had for sale - extra bread, tobacco, a kind of tea substitute made from dried apple and pear cores and eau de cologne. The Poles never managed to buy the eau de cologne as somehow the Russians always knew when it was coming in and grabbed the lot. You may be wondering why in an all-male prison camp men should want this commodity. It

was not for its scent. It was for its alcohol. They drank it. It didn't make them drunk. It made them wild. They would start fighting and shouting and chasing each other around and would eventually end up in the cooler. I never had the opportunity to taste this liquid so I cannot say why it had this effect on people, but certainly it was much sought after.

We were vaguely aware of what was happening in the war. It was depressing. The Germans seemed to be advancing far into Russian territory. The war was going the German's way. We heard no cheerful news at all.

CHAPTER 16

Over the long autumn and winter I was quickly improving my understanding of the Russian language. Grysza was my immediate boss in the plumbing section and gave me my orders. He was a Muscovite who was serving 20 years (possibly for murder), and talking to him taught me many new words - especially swear words. He was very interested in the west and would not believe that in Poland we had electricity and did not split matches into four as the Russian propaganda informed him. He was a bombastic man, short-tempered and threatening. He upset me for a while with his, "Fuck your mother, fuck your father," Until I realised that this was his way of swearing and not to be taken literally. The only way to stand up to him was to talk to him in the same vein. I quickly learned to swear just as vehemently as he did.

One of the boiler men hailed from Bessarabia which was annexed to Russia voluntarily before the hostilities and has now disappeared. He had been a high-ranking officer in the Russian Tank Regiment. He told me of his part in parachuting tanks from aircraft, which I found hard to believe, but had no reason to doubt. He was a staunch communist and he was also serving 20 years for treason.

The Chief Engineer, Murzyn, was a tolerant man. He had been a high ranking air force officer and his sentence and crime was unknown to me. I respected him.

One of the plumbers with whom I worked had no fingers on one of his hands. I felt that he was always on my side when Grysza started cursing and shouting at me. It was he who had told me to take no heed and advised me to shout back in similar vein. As we became friendlier I asked him how he came to lose his fingers.

"I was sent in the early 30's to work on the Moscow Canal. It is true what they say. This canal was built on the bones of the locked up. The atrocities those guards inflicted on their prisoners. If you were too ill to work they would put you to the tree stump. You had to strip naked and stand on this tree stump. The land was very marshy round there and the mosquitoes would bite you mercilessly. If you fell off the stump they shot you. If you didn't you probably died of malaria. It was a no win situation. Working on the canal was deadly - not many survived it. Whenever workers died or were invalided out other prisoners replaced them. Human life is an expendable commodity. The 'norms' were impossible and so were the mosquitoes. The only way to escape death was to injure yourself so severely as to be invalided out. True you were punished for injuring yourself - I got 8 years for chopping these fingers off - but you were sent to other labour camps or exiled to collective farms where your chances of living were much greater. If I had stayed on the Moscow canal I would have been dead."

I could hardly believe his story. What was more difficult to believe was that he was still a staunch communist. Shortly afterwards his story was confirmed by another prisoner with similar experiences. A guard had beaten him so severely with a rifle butt that his face and jaw had been smashed up. Because of his injuries he had also escaped from the Moscow canal.

I found that the Russian prisoners would talk honestly to me when there were no other Russians there. Whenever there were two or more Russians they would be very cagey - they would never utter any criticism of the regime. Informers were everywhere. No one could be trusted. It was impossible to tell who was in the pocket of the state.

The Russian guards did not fraternise with the prisoners. They also trod a precarious path. Any suspicion against any of them and they would have ended up on the other side of the fence.

It was the in-joke at the time that in Russia there were two classes of people, the guards and the prisoners. Every so often they just changed places.

One day an electric welder arrived in my workshop. It was a monstrous thing and as there was insufficient room for it in the Engineering shop it was placed in the only place where there was room - the Plumbing shop. The Chief Engineer had acquired it to try and speed up some of the engineering processes. A petrol generator powered it. Like most things that arrived in the workshops it was old and it didn't work, but a plumbing assistant who came from Silesia spent as much time as possible overhauling it. Any spare time I had was utilised in helping him. Any parts that were required were fashioned out of any scrap available on the lathes and milling machines in the engineering shop. Eventually, after much trial and error, we finished it. There was one further difficulty that had to be overcome before we could try it out. The generator ran on paraffin that we had, but would only start with petrol that we hadn't. Petrol was scarce and we were not allowed any. But we desperately wanted to test it out and the Engineers wanted to use their new toy.

Ever resourceful the two of us went to the fuel store on the pretext of collecting paraffin. As this was a regular occurrence the store man who kept watch on what we were doing directed us to the paraffin tank. The petrol tank was next to the one containing paraffin. One of us started chatting to him while the other collected the fuel. While the store man was distracted the bucket was quickly transferred to the petrol tank for a short while then returned to paraffin to finish filling the container. The store man being so absorbed in the conversation was unaware of the switch. We then hurriedly left the store carrying the fuel in the large bucket very carefully across the clearing to the Plumbing shop. The full bucket was very heavy and we had to carry it between us on a stout pole. The bucket was then left until the

contents settled. The petrol being lighter than paraffin rose to the top and we carefully skimmed it off and stored it in cans for future use. This was an example of the Russian mentality. Equipment would be sent that was either broken or of no use. If by chance something arrived in working order its use was frustrated by petty officialdom. Subterfuge was the only way round many of our problems.

By the way, the generator and welder did work - noisily.

Our work was not confined to that which was necessary for our camp. Rig boring tips would arrive in the workshop. These were cylindrical pipes with tungsten carbide teeth, which had worn down. Our job was to replace the tungsten carbide and to manufacture new parts when required. There was obviously some geological drilling going on in the vicinity.

There were my compatriots who did not survive the camp. Gusek who came from Krakow and worked in the Engineering shop died of pneumonia. Adam, a cheerful soul, who also came from Krakow and with whom I had many stimulating conversations started eating more and more salt with his food. We remonstrated with him and reminded him that he was digging his own grave but to no avail. He swelled up bit by bit like a balloon and there was very little we could do other than to watch him die. He was an educated and intelligent man and had been either a student or a professor at Krakow University and well understood what he was doing. His death had been self-inflicted when he had got to the stage where he couldn't take it any longer. His death upset me very much. What a waste of a life that could have achieved so much. This system has a lot to answer for come the day of judgement. I wondered if I would yet plummet to those depths of despair. He had been put to work in the quarries.

Another boy who was a Polish Jew also committed suicide. One day when being marched out to work he took the fated two steps to one side and began shouting obscenities at the guards. He

was shot. This caused quite a stir in the camp and the guard who had carried out the shooting was quickly transferred to another camp for fear of reprisals. To give the Russians their due they would have done the same to one of their own compatriots in the circumstances. All prisoners were alike to them and no bias was shown.

Round about October and November the snow started to fall. It continued regularly falling and freezing. There was no attempt to clear any away - we just trampled it down as we walked along our roads to and from work. Eventually we would be walking on about 2 feet of compressed snow and where it had not been trampled it was waist high. It got colder. The river froze over. The pipe supplying water to the pump had to lie on the riverbed just to keep the supply going. The stoves in the barracks were inadequate. The centre of the room was warm up to a radius of about 2 metres but the rest was icy cold. The inside walls of the hut were covered in frost and it was impossible to keep warm. Everyone returning from work had to bring two logs to fuel the stove and even this was not always sufficient. Most huts kept an axe, which was illegal, but there was no other way of splitting the logs small enough to fit the stove. Every so often when the huts were searched and these axes, which the administration said could be used as weapons, would be confiscated but within twenty-four hours there would again be an axe in every hut. Necessity is the father of subterfuge.

A twenty four-hour watch had to be kept on the steam pipes to try to prevent them freezing up. The boilers couldn't cope and the stokers couldn't feed enough logs into the boilers. It was a constant battle against the elements. The plumbers and stokers were working round the clock and still not maintaining even the status quo. I was really beginning to feel the strain, but I was determined not to let the bastards get me down.

The coldness and the debilitating effort needed took its toll. Just before Christmas, one of the boiler men's assistants fell ill and I had to take his place. There were two shifts - a day shift and a night shift. I was on the night shift. The work was hard. The wood was used in relation to its dryness to control the boiler's pressure. Dry wood to increase the pressure, wet wood to dampen it down. The logs were brought in by the timber men and stacked up outside the boiler house. These were the full diameter of tree trunks and were too big to feed into the boilers. They had to be split down to a manageable size. We used a very heavy axe to chop up the logs and every stroke sent shock waves through your body. The pieces then had to be loaded on wagonettes 2 metres high, wheeled into the boiler house and unloaded where they were stacked for use. In the freezing cold winter it was difficult to keep up with the boilers. The wood was being used in such quantities there wasn't sufficient dry enough to raise the pressure. We couldn't keep it long enough in the boiler house to dry out. The odds were stacked against us with a vengeance.

As Christmas got nearer and nearer, the Poles started organising a small celebration. We intended to sing carols round the stove and hopefully forget our troubles for a short while. This would be the first Christmas I had not shared with my family and more and more I began remembering all the happy family gatherings. What was happening in Krakow now? Was my family all right? Would they still be celebrating under German Occupation? I felt sure they would. Were they wondering where I was? I was glad that they did not know and couldn't see me in this poor bedraggled state of utter exhaustion.

When Christmas Eve came I had to work as the boiler stoker on the night shift. It was just my luck that I was stuck out here when my fellow Poles were having their meagre celebration. I was determined, however, not to forget Christmas altogether however hard I had to work and however little respite from

feeding the insatiable open mouth of the big boiler. As I was chopping the logs outside I was looking for the First Star. The night was extremely cold and even my winter prison clothes could not keep out the bitter cold which penetrated to the marrow. Even the effort needed to swing the axe repeatedly on to the unresponsive wood was insufficient to quell the violent shivers, which racked my body from time to time. I swung my arms out and then in across my body and stamped my feet in an effort to increase the blood circulation. But all to no avail. It needed the constitution of an ox and the superhuman effort of an Atlas to survive this Godforsaken place. I chopped logs, I looked for the star, I wheeled wagonettes into the boiler house. I chopped. I looked. I Wheeled. I felt very lonely, very sentimental, very frightened and extremely low. I thought of my parents looking for the star - the same star I was seeking. Were they looking for it and thinking of me? I felt sure that they would be. My mother would be praying for my safe return. Why are you not answering a mother's prayer? A deep despair began to take hold of me. I couldn't shake it off. Tears pricked my eyes. I sniffed them back. Again they welled up and this time I was unable to control the sobs, which caught the back of my throat. I gave in. I sobbed uncontrollably. Something snapped. I shrieked out at God through my heaving breast and called Him to account for sending me to this inhospitable place and landing me in my present predicament. I became more and more hysterical, screaming and shouting at God and hurling lumps of wood in the air at Him. I accused, I blamed, I reproached, I pleaded, I shook my fist at Him. I challenged His very existence. I must have seemed such a pathetic figure trying to hit God with my logs with tears freezing on my cheeks.

Eventually the boiler man heard my shouts and came out to see what all the noise was. Who was I shouting at? What was happening? Have you gone mad? This brought me to my senses.

I composed myself. He was a Russian and Christmas meant nothing to him. He would definitely not understand. I made the excuse that I had dropped a log on my foot and he appeared to believe it. Nevertheless, that night I sank to the lowest despair of my life. I could see no way out. Moreover, I didn't even see the First Star.

There were many times during the winter when it became impossible to keep the boilers going but it was imperative that the pipes did not freeze. If the overflow pipe started to freeze we had to put an oily rag round the pipe and set light to it to thaw out the frost. If the pipe froze it meant disconnecting it and letting water out of the radiators so that the steam could flow. If this wasn't done the whole system would have to be shut down and questions were asked. Woe betides you if they felt you were to blame. You were liable to get another 5 years for 'sabotage'. We walked a precarious tightrope.

At the beginning of January the temperature dropped so low that the spirit in the thermometer froze. All work stopped. That is all but the essential maintenance of boilers and electrics and the felling of timber for the boiler and generator. Those men who had to be out were instructed to always go in pairs. This was to prevent frostbite attacking without being noticed. It was essential that we watched each other's faces for the telltale signs. The river froze to its full depth. We had to get water to the boiler. Luckily the feeder tank was full and as we were not producing steam this lasted for some time. We had to find some way of melting the ice on the river. Fires were lit on top of the ice and fuelled with old engine oil and logs and eventually the ice melted sufficiently for us to refill the tank. This cold spell lasted several days. It then took another two days to restart the steam for the factory.

The Russians told us that if they needed you for work they would pin anything on you in order to lengthen your sentence. Should we work hard and be good at our job? Would the

Russians want to keep such good workers? Should we be not so good? These were the questions we were asking ourselves. If we were released we understood that as criminals we had to settle in the area. There was no hope of gaining civilisation again. Some of the prisoners would give up hope, do less work, get less food and eventually die rather than live for this prospect. It was the fear of the unknown. No sign of hope.

At one point the Commander of the camp ordered everyone to be reselected for jobs and it fell to my lot to be allocated to the quarry. I was given a pickaxe and a shovel and allocated to a six-man gang. There was a knack to breaking rock with the pickaxe, which I did not have, and so every strike sent shock waves through my body. Here a 'norm' had to be reached. The 'norm' related to the number of wagonettes filled with stone. It was more economical on effort to load these wagonettes with as large pieces as possible. Often the chunks would require two men to lift them. I was a seven stone weakling and there was no way that I would be able to keep up this kind of work more than a few days. It was far too hard for my weakened body. My hands were blistered and I achieved very little, but fate took a hand.

I started suffering from blinding headaches. Then a large swelling appeared behind my ear. I was in agony and had to report to the Doctor. I was suffering from a mastoid, which is an infection behind the ear. I was in excruciating pain and the doctor signed a chit to say that I could not work. The camp doctor was afraid to lance it because this could have killed me so I had to sign a special document permitting him to do the operation. If I died the doctor would not be to blame. There wasn't much choice. I would probably have died if he hadn't done anything. Anything was better than the pain that shot through my head. There was no anaesthetic available in the camp but I begged the doctor to operate. The pain of the operation couldn't be any worse than that which I was already suffering. The symptoms were worse than

the cure. Two men were conscripted to hold me down. The doctor took out his knife and the blade pierced the skin. I fainted, not from the pain but from the release of pressure that was on my head. The operation was a complete success.

I was off work sick for three weeks after this. The doctor prescribed some extra food - two raw potatoes every day - and he kept me under observation. When I was fit again I was allocated to work in the factory. So far my life had been spared. This work was also fairly hard as muscle power was required and we had to work to a 'norm'. It was reasonably easy to fiddle the norm in the factory and for the short time I was there we received extra rations for exceeding the 'norm'. These extra rations consisted of some thick starchy gruel. On top of this we were given a teaspoonful of Sunflower oil that tasted magnificent.

Here I met and talked to an elderly man who was the night watchman in the factory. He was a Pole by blood and name but resided in Moscow. He had been in charge of a Printing works in Moscow but something went wrong and he was charged with sabotage. He was a sad character. He had a wife and family in Moscow but expected never to see them again.

Fate interceded once more on my behalf. With constantly having my hands in water I suffered from a 'whitlow' on the thumb. Once again this meant an operation - this time a minor one -the end of my thumb had to be cut off. Although this was again without anaesthetic I needed no hefty hands to hold me down. I was fit for work shortly after this and was relieved to be allocated back to my old job as a plumber.

Somehow I survived the winter. The battle of Leningrad began and the Russians were running short of front line soldiers so they offered Russian prisoners their freedom as long as they joined the army at the front. My supervisor in the plumbing shop volunteered and so I was put in charge. I was not sorry to see him go. I suspected that he was a homosexual although he had never

approached me and I gave him no opportunity. He was a bit of a dandy and wore some kind of scented oil on his hair. I couldn't stand the smell of this preparation and avoided being anywhere near him.

Very little news reached us from the outside world and the little that did reach us was bad. We felt that we had nobody to speak for us, nobody to care. We felt doomed for life. People were dying around us. How long could we last here? How long before I would be detailed to work in the quarries or the timber yards? I could not survive there. I had some short experience of the quarrying and I knew it was too hard for me.

At the back of the boiler was a wooden water tank about 2 metres deep. When everything was running smoothly I would heat the water with one of the steam pipes, and climb in to have a luxurious bath. When I had put stones in the bottom of the tank to stand on, the water would reach up to my neck. I had to stop using the brown soap in this water as I found it affected the injector that then had to be stripped and cleaned. Nevertheless, it was nice to feel clean skin even if my clothes smelled of the linseed oil and red oxide we used every day. Showers were available but their use was strictly limited to something like once a month. I was able to bath at least once a week - often more.

Spring comes in that part of the world very suddenly. One morning I woke up to hear what sounded like cannon fire. I was told that this was the ice on the rivers cracking as the warm water flowed both below and above it. Flood time. The water rises very quickly as the snow and ice thaw rapidly. The ice starts packing and floating down the river and anything that gets in its way is demolished.

The plumbers have to quickly dismantle all the steam pipes that go across the small river before the ice and floods reach it. It is a race against time. When the floods come the ice crushes the

wooden structure and water flow into matchstick size pieces and it disappears before your eyes. It is a fantastic sight. It is all over in a few seconds yet seems to be happening in slow motion. Pieces of wood erupt into the air, hang for a second and then sink back into the fast flowing water quickly disappearing with hardly a plank left to mark where the structure had been. Everyone except the plumbers and electricians are confined to camp and work has to stop until the flow subsides. Then the structure has to be rebuilt and the pipes re-laid once more.

The land is very marshy and consequently in the short summer there are plagues of midges and mosquitoes. It was compulsory to wear gloves and a mesh sack over the head to avoid blood poisoning from the insects' bites. Again I was lucky as I was young and my body could stand up to the terrible conditions but many older men couldn't take it and died. Almost everybody suffered from the bites and diseases such as scurvy were commonplace. Some people suffered from huge suppurating boils, which were almost the size of potatoes. It was difficult to say which was the lesser of two evils - the bitter cold or the biting insect.

It was not quite as difficult to keep the steam up during the warmer weather and so our efforts could be slightly relaxed. This was the time when the boilers were stripped and overhauled. Having two boilers, one large and one small, meant that production didn't have to stop whilst this essential maintenance work was carried out. Spare parts had to be made on the spot out of anything available and often all our ingenuity was tested in making difficult components.

During the summer nearly all the Russians had left under the conditions of freedom in exchange for fighting at the front. The camp now was almost all Polish. Some of the threats, which had been kept at bay, were now discharged. There was some sense of relief.

There was a radio in the main admin building, which was occasionally amplified so that the prisoners could hear the broadcast. From here we heard vague pronouncements that the British and Americans were sending aid to Russia and there was some mention of negotiations to release the Polish prisoners. Dared we hope?

At the end of the summer the news came. America and Britain had persuaded the Russians to release us. Nazi Germany had attacked the Soviet Union and on 22 June 1941 Stalin had released General Anders from Lubianka to form a Polish Army in Russia.

Shortly after this the gates were opened and we were told that we were free. What did this mean to us? Where were we? What did freedom mean in this uninhabited land? If we left the camp where could we go? We had no identity papers. So for some time not a lot changed apart from the gates being opened. We went to work as usual. We were no better fed. However, we were free men.

Eventually lorries came in and transported us to the railway station. Although free we were still under guard. We were taken in front of the Russian Commissar who handed us our belongings and documents. I was amazed that these items, which had been taken from me when I was first captured all that time ago, were there almost intact. The only thing missing were my school certificates. My watches, although there, were confiscated as contraband.

The Russian official asked each of us where we would like to go. This question came as quite a surprise to us as we had not expected any choice in the matter. None of us had much idea of place names but all of us wanted to go as far south as we possibly could - the nearest place to civilisation as we remembered it. The places I knew were in German hands. I racked my brains to try to

think of a southern town. Tashkent and Samarkand were the only ones, which I remembered as somewhere in the south, so that is where I asked to go. He argued. I argued. He suggested. I refused. Eventually he gave in and agreed. He brought his official stamp heavily on a document and passed it to me. When I looked at it there was no mention of Tashkent or Samarkand only Komi SSR. I remonstrated with him.

"You have given me a document for this state. I asked for Tashkent."

Without looking up he shrugged,

"Too late, I have issued it and stamped it. Can't be changed now."

I argued, but got nowhere. He finally dismissed me,

"When you get to your destination, you can apply to go to another state. There will be no trouble."

Surprise, surprise, everyone's documents were for Komi SSR.

There had been no choice. We should have expected it. I suppose we had had some vague hope that they would treat we Poles differently from the Russian criminal who knew he had to stay in the place where he had been working. Would we ever learn? So much for promised freedom. Russian freedom had little similarity to that which the Americans and British had negotiated.

We were packed on the train, again under guard, and taken to the banks of a river. Here we were loaded in barges and set off in a convoy. As we progressed down the river the convoy got shorter and shorter as men were disembarked. I was in one of the last barges to pull in to the bank and I was eventually put ashore near a timber settlement. We were told

"This is your stop. Get out."

We were "free".

CHAPTER 17

The place of my freedom was Piezmog and the river bringing me there was the Vychegda. I stepped on to dry land in a clearing surrounded by the never-ending larch forests. Logs stacked around queuing up to be shipped down river. A few miserable communal log huts were a stark reminder of those so recently and thankfully vacated. There was an air of resigned poverty and abandoned hope about the place, which obliterated the somewhat, tarnished positive aspect our freedom had promised.

Along with Karol and a few other Polish ex-prisoners we approached, not without a little anxiety, one of the cheerless log cabins. We had hoped for so much, but all of a sudden expected little. Had we exchanged one prison camp for another? What sort of reception would we receive from the Russian people? Would there be any food? To our surprise the occupants were from Poland. Not ex-prisoners as might have been expected in such surroundings, but "free" men. Dejectedly they told us that they had been forced to leave their homes in East Poland. The occupying Russians had rounded them up, bundled them into trains to unknown destinations. They had been given no choice in the matter and irrespective of their various talents or backgrounds had been put to work in the timber felling industry. What little possessions they had brought with them had been long gone and they were living in a state of destitution waiting for the war to end so they could go home. Mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, all forcibly evacuated from their homes to populate the area for no more than their daily starvation diet of bread and soup - virtual prisoners with no prospect of foreseeable release. With identity documents their ability to travel from place to place was limited. Without them they could hardly step outside the settlement. They were in no better condition than we were as the able-bodied among them had to share their meagre rations with

the very young and the very old that were unable to carry out much physical work. They were half-starved and demoralised.

We had been told to report for work to the Commissar in charge of the settlement and we would be allowed food there. He seemed not to have been informed of our arrival and intimated that there was no work at present but something would be sorted out. He allowed us to collect food from the settlement dining room - bread and soup. I was sick and tired of bread and soup. Was there nothing else in this world but bread and soup? Was this all they were eating in the west? Maybe it was. It didn't fill me. It gave me little nourishment. However, it was all there was. Either eat it or starve. I ate it to live, the constant hunger pangs still unsuppressed.

Choice of accommodation was left to us. One cabin was much like any other. An empty hut was indicated if we wished to use it. There was no compulsion. Choice was finding a free space on one of the long bunks in any of them. Wherever you laid your meagre belongings was home.

Exploration of the area was our main occupation for the first day or so. Mushrooms grew in profusion in the forest and they became a supplement to our monotonous diet. Gathering sufficient small pieces of wood to fuel the stove was also a prime occupation. Socialising, evaluating the situation, the probabilities and the possibilities, took up the rest of our waking hours.

Among the people who existed there when we arrived was an old couple. During my short stay there they both died of starvation apparently within a short time of each other. It was difficult to say who died first and when. Often there was a reluctance to declare a death and for the relatives to keep the body as long as possible. In this way the deceased person's food ration could carry on being claimed. When the two bodies were found and removed their mattress was found to contain hundreds of silver Polish coins. The Russians immediately confiscated these.

In my opinion their deaths had been unnecessary. With this amount of silver, which the Russians, hungry for any precious metals, would have exchanged for food, they could have survived for quite some time without difficulty. The assumption is that they were prepared to starve rather than relinquish their hoard. The irony is that the Russians grabbed the silver without having to give anything in return.

We mooched around this camp for several days with no evidence of any work being carried out. We received our rations of bread. My evaluation of the situation was that this was a place in which I would starve. Nothing seemed to happen. No work seemed imminent. A totally depressing place. When the Commissar requested that we relinquish our documents in order to continue to receive food, pending the work situation being sorted out, it became decision time. From the Polish people already in this predicament we were warned that once our documents had been surrendered we would have difficulty retrieving them. Without them we could not even travel to the next settlement. The Russians did not approve of citizens moving from place to place. Organisation seemed non-existent in this camp. Knowing only too well the procrastination which seemed to be part of all Russian officialdom, I made up my mind to forego the bread ticket and my chance to starve as a timber worker, for the more uncertain odds of getting a job and starving elsewhere, but independent of the Commissars.

I was pointed towards the village of Piezmog as being the nearest place to search for work. I told the few Poles who had come with me from the concentration camp of my decision but no one else wanted to take the risk. They decided to take their chances of finding work in the timber yards. Disappointed in their decision, but undeterred, I set off alone to walk there. The road was a rough track manufactured by the carts, which had travelled along it. Most village roads in Russia were of this ilk. When they

became too rutted or muddy a new track would appear alongside the old one. I trudged along carrying my worldly possessions in a bundle slung over my shoulder, meeting no one, fairly confident that I had made the right decision. Larch to the left, larch to the right, larch to the front, underfoot a cleared space where, no doubt, larch used to grow. My confidence waned a little on reaching the village, which was little more than settlement of collective farms. I could see little prospect of work here, as the farms were small with few animals. Little actual work appeared to be going on. Typical Russian houses built of logs above the ground, space for animals and hay underneath; small patches of cultivated land. These were houses of the better off. Again I was surprised to find many Polish families also from the occupied east living here. I wondered at the number of possessions they seemed to have managed to bring with them - linen sheets, small items of furniture, pictures etc; relative luxury in this country; relative poverty in Poland. Their transport must have been much less crowded than ours had been; maybe four or five to a wagon where we had eighty.

As expected there was no work available. I surmised that they were only surviving by gradually selling their few possessions to buy subsistence food. They told me of the Piezmog settlement nearby, where there was a bakery, a sawmill and a kind of academy/engineering works training youngsters specialising in riverboat engines. I scrounged some food off these Polish peasant farmers (who shared what little they had with me), I thanked them for their hospitality, and I set off once more.

The journey again took me through forest. The pale bare stems either side like a great army standing to attention. My steps now a little less jaunty, my shoulders stooping, my spirits a little lower. My scrawny legs began to ache, the soles of my feet were feeling sore and all my energy was required just to trundle along this dusty, sandy road. At last the track widened to a clearing and

the clearing opened to reveal the settlement buildings. The afternoon light was softening as I made my way to the bakery. Preparing the dough for the next day's bread were two bakery assistants and without breaking off their task they asked what I wanted. I explained my situation and my need for work. Although desperately hungry, having only eaten the small piece of bread given to me in the village, I spent quite some considerable time telling them my story. Flattering them a bit, trying hard to ingratiate myself with them, I listened to their experiences, hoping they may be able to find me a job. They were Polish Ukrainians resettled by the Russians and showed a great deal of interest in me. I was the first person they had met who was a released criminal. My confidence was rising and at last they offered me some bread to eat and some yeast substitute to drink. The Russian manager was called but regretfully there was no job available in the bakery. He was very sorry but advised me to see the manager at the settlement cookhouse. He might want an assistant. I trudged over to the cookhouse.

Once more I related my story, this time to Stefan, the Russian manager. By now I was quite fluent in the Russian language and I talked to him in his own tongue. I had to go right back to the history of the war and explain where Poland was, as he had no geographical knowledge. He knew there was a war but he had no idea where the fighting was or which countries were involved - typical of so many of the ordinary Russian people I came across in my travels. Knowing only what the state wanted them to know. The conversation with Stefan lasted some considerable time - an hour or more. I was getting desperate. I hadn't expected work would be so difficult to find. I begged him to give me a job. Any job. I said, "I don't want money, I'm not interested in roubles, only survival. All I want is payment in kind - food."

He was very regretful.

"I am sorry I have no need of any more workers. I can't employ you even on those terms. I wish I could. But wait here, I will see if Sacha needs an assistant."

He went to the back of the cookhouse and called,

"Sacha, Sacha, can you come here a minute?"

Sacha came in. He was a typical old time Cossack just as I had seen illustrated in books. Six feet tall with a big droopy moustache, bushy eyebrows and receding ginger hair. He could have been any age between forty and sixty standing proudly on his stocky, curved legs - a typical horse rider, his legs 'moulded on a barrel'. The voice that resounded from deep in his abdomen suited his physique, heavy and booming. Stefan asked him if he wanted an assistant repeating my terms - no money, just food. Sacha looked me up and down, asked me a few questions and then said,

"Yes. I think I could do with another pair of hands."

With a great sense of relief I had become a drayman.

Grandpa Sacha as all knew him was well respected and we got on very well right from the start. He showed me the place where he slept and indicated that I was welcome to share. In one of the rooms in the cookhouse there were large brick built ovens heated from below, fuelled by wood. These were used every day for cooking the meals served in the dining area and at the academy. When the fires went out at night Grandpa Sacha and I would make our beds on top of these ovens. We were assured of an early morning start. At 4 a.m. work started in the cookhouse and the first job done by the cackling, singing Russian women was lighting the fire under the oven. If this didn't wake us, the heat rising from the ovens during the following hour or so would. Frequently the women would waken us to chop wood for them. Life became a little more tolerable and normal. I stopped looking over my shoulder all the time. I got a reasonable amount of rest.

All I wanted was to build up my physical and mental strength before I decided on escape from Russia.

Hot water was available at most times in the cookhouse heated in an iron lined brick structure. Washing facilities being a tin can filled from this cauldron and carried outside. I had acquired a makeshift razor and this was used on my sparse, virgin whiskers about once a month.

Next day, my first day at work, I was introduced to the horses and the stables; three horses and a dilapidated wooden shack leaning precariously. On opening the ill-fitting door its inadequacy was apparent. A wooden rack untidy with the remains of last winter's hay, the floor beneath it roughly swept. It was a blessing that the horses only occupied it during the coldest weather as once inside there was insufficient room for them to turn round and they had to be reversed out. Leaning against this shed was an even smaller crumbling structure where the hay was stored. Carts and sledges rusticated where they had been abandoned after their latest journeys were open to the elements in the yard.

The horses, at this time roaming freely in the yard, were pony-size. The carts and sledges were small and light, simple wooden platforms and shafts atop either banded wheels or runners. Old One, Young One and White One were the horses names. White One the largest was slightly lame and could only be used on local journeys. I was to have Old One.

Grandpa Sacha showed me how to harness the horse to the cart and we set off.

Living around the cookhouse we ate pretty well as there was usually plenty of food about. Grandpa Sacha would occasionally give me money, as officially we could not eat in the cookhouse as those living in the settlement did and our bread rations were to be purchased from the shop. However, there was a reasonable amount of food passing through the kitchens with the occasional

leftovers to supplement the diets of the kitchen staff and their families. If we were around at the time we would also get a share. Everyone living in the settlements collected their quota of food from the communal dining rooms and no one ever did any cooking in their own cabins. This was the Russian communist way. It was wasteful of time and effort, which could be better spent working for the state, for individuals to prepare their own meals. More to the point it limited population movement, as food was only obtainable in their place of registration. As the cookhouse served the educational establishment nearby it tended to provide slightly better food, more variety, and once or twice we even had jelly.

The settlement had one shop nearby. The only things sold there were bread, salt, and occasionally tobacco, clothing, eau de cologne, dried fish and vodka. When the vodka arrived, which was only about twice during my time there, a queue of about 120 people would form for about 20 bottles of vodka. Vodka was fairly cheap and those few lucky ones would very rarely buy it for their own consumption. It would fetch a much higher price on the black market. When the successful purchasers left the shop with their bottles they would be mobbed by the rest and haggling would go on for some time. That night there would be rowdy uncontrolled carousing around the settlement; hardship and hunger would be obliterated by the stupefying effect of the alcohol for a brief moment.

Transport was a horse and sledge in winter and a horse and cart in summer. Many miles were covered fetching meat, butter and other provisions from the collective farms and delivering them to the main base situated near the settlement. From here the army and other official establishments were supplied with provisions. The only exception was when our cargo was flour, this being delivered direct to the bakery or cookhouse store. All around the area were these pockets of cleared forest that had been

given over to cultivation and divided into small farms whose main produce would be potatoes and hay. The number of animals would be limited to those that could be sustained. Our collections came from a central store to which each cluster of farms contributed and were weighed and documented on loading. During haymaking time we would purloin an odd sheaf of hay here and there hide them on the cart, and store them in the stables for winter fodder. The administration allocated insufficient feed (oats) for the horses and without this hay supplement they were liable to become bloated and lethargic.

Grandpa Sacha was an ex-convict and in the same boat as I was - unable to return to his previous place of residence. It was one of the conventions in the settlements that you never asked an ex-con his crime so I never found out Grandpa Sacha's misdemeanour. He was a big hefty man and could have felled me with one blow had he so desired, but I found in him a good companion and certainly by taking me on he had saved me from having to return to the timber settlement and certain starvation.

Although the produce we carried was weighed both before and after delivery to stop pilfering, ways and means could be found of abstracting small amounts of produce. Grandpa Sacha was an expert in black marketing and I became his diligent apprentice. Sacha taught me how to increase the weight of sugar in each sack so that some could be removed for sale. All that was necessary was to linger for a short while by the riverside and the weight in the sacks miraculously increased, ending up heavier than when you started; similarly with meat. If a small piece of meat on a carcass happened to be hanging loose it could be torn off without being noticeable. The rest of the carcass, when sprinkled with water from the river reverted back to the original weight. Bread stacked in such a manner that the back rows had bigger gaps than the front could deceive the store man who would only count the front row assuming that the ones further back

consisted of similar numbers. These were the perks of the job. In this way food left on the cart at the end of the trip could be bartered either along the way or kept for our own use. Even some of the horse's oats could be traded if you had sufficient hay to feed them.

Although highly illegal, black marketing was an accepted way of life. These types of practices were customary and everyone was at it. In many ways this was the only way the inhabitants of Russia at that time could survive - on black market rations. Roubles were valueless with nothing in the shops to buy. Bread was strictly rationed. It could be dodgy though. Deals had to be done with known friends, as informers were everywhere. There was usually at least one informer in each community. Russian informers were the backbone of the law enforcers and ultimately the procurers of labour in the Concentration Camps.

I became pretty well off. I had many friends some genuine, some scroungers. Most were Poles. Some stole from me, but I didn't really mind as had I been in their position I would probably have done the same.

"Gee up", I would say to the horse (in Polish) as we set off. Grandpa Sacha roared with laughter. "Gee up", again his shoulders heaved as the uncontrollable spasm took him again. I was indignant. Did he think my horse didn't understand Polish? I would show him. "Gee up", Grandpa Sacha couldn't contain himself.

"What is so funny then?"

"It sounds like you are telling the horse objob" (translation - fuck)
The Polish word was actually 'no wjo'.

Grandpa Sacha looked after me like a father. He would haul me off to the local Sauna bath saying,
"You are dirty and you are starting to smell."

When the only washing facility available is a tin can of water outside in the open air, certain parts of the body would miss out for months on end.

The bathhouse was in the Piezmog village and was run by Russians who spoke their own language and who had lived in this area for many generations. They were a touch resentful of both Russian and Polish newcomers and who could really blame them. Their fuel was getting further and further away from the village as more people chopped down trees, more and more people to share less and less vodka and tobacco; fearful of people speaking unrecognisable languages. Although they could speak Russian they would deliberately talk to each other in their own tongue in front of us. We knew them as "Komis", the region being Komi SSR.

Old One was a fairly old mare, slow and lazy. I always reckoned her a stupid animal. However, that horse had a whimsical obstinacy. She somehow instinctively knew when we were setting out on a long journey. There would be no fuss when harnessing, she would willingly pull the cart out of the yard, but the minute that her hooves touched the road she would stop. No amount of shouting, poking, slapping or lashing with the reins would make her budge. She planted her four legs firmly on the ground defiantly. She must have had a mule for an ancestor way back to account for this stubbornness. I discovered that by putting a sack over her head so that she could not see which track we were taking and leading her from the front I could persuade her to carry on. Once under way the sack could be removed without causing any further hold ups.

The horse, which Grandpa Sacha used, Young One, was a much more spirited animal. A stallion. One winter's day as it was being harnessed to the sledge it set off like a rocket with Sacha hanging on for dear life. It charged through the open gate and continued down the road towards the river, the empty sledge

twisting and bucking convulsively on the rutted and compacted snow. Sacha a very experienced horseman desperately tried to bring it under control. We stood laughing and watching his desperate efforts. I ran after it with little hope of catching up. It veered suddenly and unexpectedly to the left, the sledge skidding violently as it followed the runaway through the gates of the sawmill and timber yard. With snow piled high on either side of the road leading through the yard, the horse careered ever faster until for some unknown reason it turned right and ploughed its way into the deep snow and stopped. Have you ever heard a horse scream? It is a chilling sound. Below the surface and hidden by the snow was a low fence made of pointed wooden stakes. Young One had impaled himself on one of these spikes. Sacha jumped off the sledge and quickly assessed the situation. He unharnessed the sledge and with ropes, which we always carried on all our transport, tied up the animal's legs to stop it damaging itself further. By the time I got there the snow around was pink with the stallions blood and a crowd of workers had gathered. Sacha ordered them to bring planks of wood and organised the rescue. The wood was carefully placed beneath the animal and used to lift it from the fence. Young One was then placed on the sledge while Sacha examined its torn flesh. I was sent to collect Old One to pull the sledge back to the stables.

Both Grandpa Sacha and I were very upset at the horse's injury. Luckily the stake had not pierced any organs and Sacha got a needle and thread and sewed up the wound. The horse recovered fully with only a scar to show for its escapade. It had always been a rather unmanageable and unpredictable animal and this experience changed it not one little bit.

With a week or two of reasonable food and rest I began to feel fitter and more mentally secure. I even began to take an interest in the opposite sex. The call up of men to the forces and the Russian punitive system had left many Russian women alone.

Suffice it to say I was introduced to Inna, a Russian woman living with her young son in one of the settlement buildings. Her husband had left her some time before. She worked as a secretary in the sawmill and was an intelligent, educated woman. She shared the one room dwelling with another mother and child and we got on very well. Very soon I forsook the warmth of the oven top for the warmth of Inna. (To live with someone in Russia is to be married to them - to leave them is to become unmarried.) There I had more home comforts and also my physical needs were met. Neither of us was under any illusions about the permanency of the relationship. I would eventually leave to join the Polish army, there was no way as a Russian woman that she would be allowed to leave the country. We were fond of each other and both made the best of it for as long as I remained in the area.

Inna could play the guitar pretty well and we spent our evenings among friends chatting and singing Russian songs, and I could relax easier away from the hustle and bustle of the stables and cookhouse. A worker at the educational establishment who obviously had his eye on Inna became jealous and threatened me. I watched my step for a short while - he was swarthy and I was puny - but as time went by and nothing untoward happened I relaxed once more. He eventually told my friends that he could not possibly have a chance against me as I was intelligent and he was only a poor Russian ignoramus. You couldn't help feeling sorry for the way many Russian people tended to denigrate themselves. They were never brought up to have any self-respect. The regime saw to that. If Joe Stalin told him to beat up a Pole then he would do it, but he couldn't make up his own mind to do it of his own free will. I knew I had very little to fear from him. It was now the winter of 1941/2.

With the first hard frost of the coming winter everyone at the settlement was sent into the fields to pick the potatoes. Speed was imperative as winter came quickly and unrelentingly to this part of

Russia. The ground would soon become too hard to dig and any crops left in would be ruined. Food was too hard to come by to let this happen. There was no remuneration for this. Everybody else went, so I went. It was backbreaking work. The yellowing leaves of the potato plants were gathered together, piled up in bonfires and burned. It was a golden opportunity to roast a few potatoes in the fires for eating as we went along. The crop was in within a day and we all went back to our regular work.

Winter snow came and we exchanged our carts for sledges and irrespective of the fact that I had done most of the journeys several times, I often got lost. The snows could come down suddenly and extremely heavily so that everything around was obliterated. One minute the track was there, the next it had disappeared. There were times when I wondered whether I would ever find my bearings or freeze to death in the snow. On one occasion, I remember, the snow came down so fast that the horses could not move forward. We were stuck in the middle of nowhere. We had to keep going or we would be entombed, our bodies undiscovered until spring. The only thing we could do was abandon one sledge temporarily together with some of the load from the other sledge. The horse and sledge still could not move through the snow until I walked in front with the other horse trampling the snow down hard to make a solid pathway. As we were quite a long way from base we were totally exhausted by the time we got back - only the fear of freezing to death kept us going. We then had to take both horses back to collect the other sledge praying that we could still find it.

Things could be just as bad in the spring. I recall one incident when the thaw came very fast. We had been on a long journey and were returning with full sledges when the snow started disappearing beneath our feet. We had to zig zag our way back finding any patches of snow we could, going miles out of our way at times.

The weather was the major enemy but there were many other hazards we had to face. Once when I was away from home, staying overnight with a Russian lady of easy virtue, my cargo of meat was stolen. I had left the cart underneath the house and discovered the loss the following morning. I spent many hours tracking it down and avoided this particular house in the future. Another time we picked up some pedestrians and gave them a lift. Part way along the road they begged us to stop on some pretence and when we arrived back there were two sacks of flour missing. We retraced our steps to the only place these could have been removed and sure enough there in the snow was the indentation where the sacks had been. Luckily we had many friends in various places and the culprits were found. Any food was fair game to the local inhabitants - and who could blame them? - we had to have our eyes peeled all the time.

For the occasion of Stefan's wedding I was given money that everyone had pooled together to fetch some vodka from one of the shops in another village that had just received a supply. I was lucky to buy 2 or 3 bottles and I managed to get quite a few more by bartering with other successful purchasers. Our settlement shopkeeper, who unknown to me at that time was an alcoholic, asked for a lift back to the settlement. As we neared the river he said he knew where we could get some dried fish and although I refused at first I was eventually persuaded to go with him. We went to a fisherman's house, we were invited in and the fisherman brought out some fish. Before eating the fish he offered us a drink of some kind of spirit. I was unused to strong alcohol and in no time they must have had me drunk. The next thing I knew it was evening and I was on the cart at the stables where my horse had taken me instinctively. Grandpa Sacha was shaking me, shouting and swearing and pouring buckets of water on me, asking where was the vodka. I didn't know whether it was on the cart or not. It wasn't. It was some time before my stupefied brain could

straighten out the events of the day and I was able to recall what had happened. I was very ashamed of myself. I had been conned. How embarrassing. I must be losing my faculties. Grandpa Sacha rushed out to find this shopkeeper and he admitted that he had taken the vodka but that it was now all gone. He couldn't pay for it either. Poor Stefan had no vodka at his wedding all because of my mismanagement. For a long time after this I was very unpopular around the cookhouse. The only satisfaction that I had was that not many weeks later the shopkeeper was found in a field, dead from alcoholic poisoning.

As time went by, more and more Russians were called up into the army. Anyone who could walk at all was conscripted. Stefan the cookhouse manager was lame and walked with a pronounced limp but he was called up. Poles and Russian women were about the only people left to do the work.

When Grandpa Sacha was called up to the army I took over the Transport Depot. Karol left the timber yard and came to work with me. He had often visited me both at the stables and at Innas. We made a good team and remained good friends.

When staying overnight in any place, which was fairly often because of the distances we travelled, Karol and I usually found lodgings with Russian women who welcomed us with open arms and provided every comfort. It was better than sleeping in haylofts. In return they received whatever food we felt able to spare.

Foreigners were accepted much more readily than the indigenous population - they were considered trustworthy and less likely to be informers. All Russians lived in fear of the NKVD (forerunner of the KGB). They were all-powerful and often vindictive. All their property, their food ration, their meagre wages, their movements, were controlled by the local NKVD Commandant. All Stalin's orders and regulations were administered directly by his local representatives. If more

workers were needed in the labour camps the Commandants would be given their quota to fill meaning local arrests and required sentences.

It was easy for the local authorities to effect arrests as everybody broke the law - it was their only way of survival. Selling of goods by individuals was classed as black marketing and illegal. Everyone did it, including the Commissars and Commandants; two classes of people - those who got caught and those who didn't. Was it any wonder that everybody was suspicious of his neighbour?

Komi SSR was a drab place. There were few flowers because of the harsh climate. The trees were all the same types only differing in age. Even the people, because of the limited availability of clothing, dressed in similar drab clothes and had drab personalities. The land was poor; the climate was harsh. Only potatoes and oats were grown by the collective farms. Livestock was limited to a few horses, cattle, pigs and chickens. All produce belonged to the state and was collected by the local storekeeper for transit to Government distribution centres. None could be officially kept for food, although no doubt many farmers succeeded in appropriating small amounts, which could be quickly consumed or hidden. Few could or would think for themselves and were resigned to a life of domination of their souls, where survival was all and only the minimum amount of work to achieve this was carried out. There was no incentive to do more. The living conditions would not improve. That would only happen through the black market or through pilfering.

Improvisation was what they excelled in. They had to. Any machinery, once broken down, could not be repaired, as there were no spare parts. It either rotted away where it stood or bodged repairs were made. Buildings, which were virtually all the property of the state, were not maintained. Just left to rot

when too bad to inhabit, the occupants finding other accommodation.

Russians are gregarious people. They quickly found that they could not survive individually, only as a group sticking together and helping each other. Thus I found them very friendly and helpful towards me. There was no visible sign of religion, the Churches having been turned into storehouses and the only God Joe Stalin, so there was no Christian morality as such. Everyone had his or her own morality. Some of the older people who had remembered their religious upbringing and who continued to believe in their God kept it hidden within themselves for fear of reprisals.

Entertainment was home made. Communal radios would occasionally broadcast music or communist propaganda. Most people had little time or energy for even slightly strenuous activities. Most had never experienced any kind of leisure pursuits and could not believe, would not believe that such things existed in other countries. They were even unaware of what happened in the next Soviet region. There was little chance for improvement in their lives, unfortunately. The ordinary Russian people were fine, genuine people; diamonds hidden in the dogma of bureaucratic rocks.

With the spring came the floods. Many of our journeys had to be carried out by boat. On occasions this could be extremely dangerous because the ice floes set free by the rapid thawing water up stream congregated together forming ever bigger and bigger icebergs as they were propelled down the swollen fast flowing rivers. To be caught midstream in the path of one of these monstrosities would be like being run down by a procession of heavy steamrollers. I experienced one such incident and only survived by leaping on to the ice floe and dragging my boat away to the side. It was in danger of being crushed between several large ice floes but miraculously I managed to reach the bank with

my boat and was heartily applauded by some Russian peasants who had been standing and watching my predicament. Life was hard, downright dangerous, and rarely without incident.

In this dull, drab landscape one spectacular happening seemed incongruous; on the horizon hundreds of searchlights slanting across the sky; multicoloured beams of light, constantly traversing and criss-crossing in a display that even the modern lasers couldn't match. It was a sight so awe inspiring that the brain forgot momentarily to cope with the everyday mechanics of breathing. You felt that on walking to that place just over the horizon you would discover in the middle of the forest ranks upon ranks of powerful incandescent floodlights. But the drab Komi forests held no such apparatus. This was Mother Nature's own display, unmatched by anything which man can manufacture. The Aurora Borealis.

From some of the Polish people in the settlement Karol and I heard about the plight of a young Polish girl of about 15 or 16 who was dying in hospital from malnutrition. We visited her there, taking her some food. We talked to her, persuading her to take nourishment and as she grew stronger she told us her story. "My father is dead. He was a retired Polish Colonel. My mother, father and I were resettled here from East Poland. When we first came we were not too badly off. My father had silver and other possessions and we could have lived for some time fairly comfortably. My mother, who is much younger than my father, became friendly with some so-called Polish officers who often visited us and whom we trusted. Unbeknown to my father and me they were plotting to steal everything we possessed and then disappear. One day, while we were out, they carried out their wicked plan and when we returned my mother and all our possessions had gone. We were destitute. My father was too old to work and I was too young. We had nothing to barter with to get food, and my father eventually died of starvation. Now I am

also dying. I was brought to the hospital by some of the Polish people here. They are very kind, but can do little for me. They are very little better off than I."

Karol and I were concerned about her physical state and visited her regularly. What sort of system was this, which allowed one with so few years behind and so many years ahead to fade away into obscurity? What made a mother abandon her child to this fate? Greed, flattery, love, a promise of freedom or the inability to adjust? Whatever her reason we were sickened by her actions and loathed her for it. We kept the young girl supplied with food and she improved fairly rapidly with regular sustenance. The Polish delegate in Syktyvkar became aware of her situation and as soon as she was fit to travel they took her for a period of convalescence. Our good deed was to stand me in good stead later.

Rumours were rife that a Polish army was being formed somewhere in the south, but no one knew quite where. When quite a few of my acquaintances disappeared mysteriously, I made enquiries and was told that they had gone to join the Polish army. Some of our so-called friends with whom we had shared our extra food stole my good pair of leather shoes, which had hardly been worn and disappeared. Later we found out that they had been planning for some time to leave Komi SSR, find where the recruiting was taking place and join the Polish army. They had been stockpiling and drying bread for the journey. They had used us when it suited their purpose. It upset both Karol and I that we had been deliberately excluded from their plans. We would have gladly joined them and helped with the food rations. For a while we felt isolated and wondered why we had been abandoned in this sneaky and underhand way. As one who had always been brought up to be a true patriot I expected (perhaps foolishly) others to respect the bond of nationality. My own countrymen had shattered these illusions.

I must have been getting too complacent and comfortable in this niche I had carved for myself and someone up there felt I needed a 'kick in the arse'. Fate has a habit of wearing big boots.

Having collected quite a few loaves of bread I decided to swap them for a pair of boots. He was a good friend, a Pole, and I had no worries about him. The transaction was arranged. He gave me the boots and we arranged the hiding place for the bread, which was amongst the hay in the stables. That night he collected the bread, but instead of carrying the loaves individually so as not to arouse suspicion, he loaded them all into a sack. With a bulging sack on his back late at night he was bound to arouse suspicion. Sure enough he was stopped by the local police and questioned. He told the police where the bread had come from, whether from sheer funk or self-preservation I do not know, but it resulted in my arrest and I was taken to the local police station. The local commissar for whom I had obtained vodka on a few occasions interrogated me and a statement was made. The interview was a reasonably friendly affair, but the Commissar could not drop the case without causing suspicion. I was released but my documents were confiscated. I couldn't get very far without them.

I was not unduly worried at this time, as the Commissar had told me that I would probably get 6 months detention. This meant that I would have stayed in my job but forfeited my pay for this period. I could prove that the bread had been bought legitimately from the shop. Things went on very much as normal.

CHAPTER 18

Some short time later I was re- arrested, taken to the village and locked up overnight in a police cell. That night the local Commissar came to visit me in my cell. Naturally we discussed the possible outcome of my trial that would be held the following day. In contrast to his previous prediction of a light sentence, he warned me now that there was every chance that a heavier penalty could be coming my way. Having had some previous experience of Russian justice where innocence of crime seemed to be no defence, I suggested to him that he might just forget to lock the cell thus allowing me to escape.

"Sorry, Marian, no chance. If you escape from my custody, under Russian law I will have to take your place. Unfortunately when it comes to a choice between me and you, I am afraid it has to be you."

With that he bid me goodnight and left, carefully locking the cell behind him.

The following day with the rest of the criminals (two Komi women) I was led in front of the judge. The court was held in a room used by the villagers as a community meeting place. The judge (who travelled from village to village conducting trials) along with two other men sat behind a table. The accused and any witnesses sat on chairs at the other end of the room and onlookers stood behind. The two women were called first.

"Is your name?"

"Yes"

"You are charged with allowing two pigs to die. Have you any explanation or defence to this charge?"

Although the two women gave some details, these were to no avail.

"Sentence, two years hard labour each."

The two women returned to their seats with an air of resignation. It was obvious that although they may not have expected such a harsh sentence, there was little they could do about it.

"Is your name Marian Krupa?"

"Yes"

"You are charged with stealing bread and selling it on the black market. Do you have any explanation or defence to these charges?"

"I most certainly do. The bread was bought by me from the shopkeeper at the settlement."

"You cannot buy that amount of bread - it is far in excess of your ration."

"I work in transport and have to make long journeys which may take several days. I have no option but to buy my bread in bulk. Do you want me to starve when I am working away from the settlement? I am allowed to buy my bread either in advance of my trip or when I return. The shopkeeper has written authorisation allowing this."

"What limit is on this authorisation?"

"There is no stipulated limit."

The shopkeeper was called and questioned and corroborated my story.

The judge was visibly displeased and reprimanded the shopkeeper saying she had no right to sell me that amount of bread and that she ought to have been on trial for conspiracy. Rather a case of sour grapes as the stealing charge had to be dropped.

On the charge of selling bread on the black market, I argued that as the bread was mine and had been purchased legitimately it could not possibly be classed as black market goods. Whatever questions the judge tossed at me I had what I considered a legitimate answer. I pleaded that under Soviet justice I was not guilty of the charge. To no avail.

"You are a Pole. What do you know of Soviet justice? You are ignorant of Russian law. The bread that you are entitled to in any given day and you have eaten during that day belongs to you. Any other bread belongs to the state. Two years hard labour." I was dumbfounded and so were my friends who had come to the court.

"You are now under guard and will be taken from here straight to prison."

The women who lived in the village were allowed to collect their belongings. The guard then marched us towards our destination.

As we had to pass the settlement I also asked permission to collect some of my belongings. At first the guard refused, but when I suggested that we may also be able to get a meal there to prepare us for the journey he relented. I bundled up my meagre belongings and Inna gave me a raincoat, which had belonged to her husband. The prisoners and guard ate a hearty meal and then set off. I slung the raincoat over my shoulder and with my bundle under my arm we walked down the road towards the river. Inna and Karol walked with us and as I passed the bake house the bakers wished me good luck and said that two years would soon pass. As we walked I discussed with Karol (in Polish) my circumstances and told him that in no way was I prepared to finish in a Concentration camp as I did before and that I intended to escape. We decided that it was best that he leave us and go back so that he could not be implicated and he also tried to persuade Inna to go back with him. However, she was very upset and was crying and decided to accompany me further.

I had decided that if I was going to escape it had to be somewhere on this journey as we had only one guard for three people and once we got near the prison escape would be impossible. I had no firm idea of how I would manipulate this

escape but I would keep alert to any possibility. It would have to be soon.

We walked past the sawmill and timber yard, Inna still weeping at my side. I tried to comfort her and to persuade her to return to the settlement. If my escape went wrong it was better that she did not see the result.

As we approached a slow meandering tributary to the River Vycheгда I told Inna to return to the settlement. I gave her my bundle of belongings saying that when I ran off I wanted no encumbrances. She said her tearful farewells and turned to trudge sadly the mile or so back to the settlement.

The river had fairly steep banks and as we descended towards the water I asked the guard how he intended that we should cross. I was quite well aware of the method. The logs from the timber yard had congregated at this point and were spread from bank to bank. The guard said that we would cross by jumping from one log to another.

"I can't possibly do that. I have never crossed a river like that. I don't know how to do it."

The guard, obviously trying to shame me, sent the two women across first and told me to watch how they did it.

"I can't do that. I am afraid. I might fall between the logs and be drowned."

As I argued with the guard, the two women reached the far bank and stood waiting and watching. I could procrastinate no longer. I was still carrying the raincoat over my shoulder. I needed to get rid of it. Speed was of the essence. I tore it from my shoulder. It billowed out. It landed not on the ground but over the head and shoulders of the waiting guard. I ran up the bank and into the forest.

I was over the brow of the bank before I heard shots fired. I ran and I ran. I was running a race. The race of my life. As far as I could. As fast as I could. Like quicksilver through the trees.

Every scorching step distancing me from my captors. The adrenalin was flowing. I kept going on and on. One ear open for the barking of the dogs.

All that day I ran. Blindly through the marshland and forest. Knowing that the guards from the local concentration camp with Alsatian dogs would be looking for me. I had to build up as much distance as possible between the policeman and myself. The guard would be in a quandary. He couldn't follow me without leaving two other prisoners. Losing a prisoner meant serving the sentence himself. He would have some distance to travel before finding somewhere to call for assistance. He also had two women to escort. If he decided to turn back it would take him at least an hour. Maybe longer. The women had to be retrieved from the far riverbank. I prayed they would not rush. If he crossed the river and carried on it would take him longer to get to the next settlement. Either way, I knew that I had a few hours before the guards would be out chasing me.

As my brain started to function in a rational manner I panicked. I wondered whether I was doing the right thing. Should I turn back and give myself up. I had been stupid thinking I could get away with it. When I became exhausted I sat down on the ground and argued with myself. I knew my chances of survival on the run were limited. But every time I thought of the two years hard labour it sent a shiver down my spine and I pulled myself up and ran on and on.

I remembered from my school days that your scent was lost in water so every time I came to a small stream or river I would not cross it directly but wade some way up or down stream. The dogs would be delayed trying to pick up my scent on the other bank. I had no illusions about them losing it altogether. I knew that was unlikely. However, any delay on their part had to be to my advantage. All the time I was running I had one ear cocked for the sound of barking dogs. If I had doubts about carrying on

the distant barking fuelled my determination to escape them for as long as possible.

During the night I hid myself as best I could. I was exhausted and wet through. I rested and reviewed my situation. I was fairly certain that the guards would not attempt to follow me during the hours of darkness. It was impossible to see anything in the forest. I knew the local area fairly well because of my many travels in my transport job. My main guidance would be the river and although I couldn't run alongside it for fear of being spotted I needed to be fairly near it in order to keep my bearings. As long as I kept crossing tributaries, I was going in the right direction and I was also delaying the dogs. Another tip I remembered from my school days and which stopped me from going round in circles was that the moss grows on the south side of the trees. The night was spent dozing and listening for any sounds especially barking dogs. However, I heard none.

As soon as it was light I got up and started to run once more, but I couldn't. Every step brought on excruciating pain in my legs. I was at a loss to understand why. I sat down and took off my trousers to try to find the reason. My legs were raw and bleeding from the constant rubbing against my wet trousers. How could I carry on in this condition? My efforts would all come to nought and it would be only a matter of time before I was caught. But what else could I do? My mind said not to give in. My body argued the opposite. I found that the pain was less without any covering. I decided to carry on running trouserless. As soon as I came to water I washed the blood from my trousers, and then carried them on a stick over my shoulder to try and dry them.

I had wandered further into the forest than I had imagined and it took some time for me to gain a reasonable safe spot where I knew the river was near at hand. During the day I heard dogs barking several times and I tried to assess where they might be. I continued to track up and down the streams. It was also soothing

to my raw legs to immerse them in water every so often. On and on I ran, stopping occasionally to catch my breath and listen. I decided that I must be fairly near to a small settlement where I knew there were some Polish people living. I headed towards there hoping to get some help.

When it became obvious that the settlement was near, I retreated into the forest and hid until dark. I had been running for almost two days and I was hungry and exhausted. The only food passing my lips since I escaped had been mushrooms and berries from the forest.

When it got dark and I felt it safe to leave the forest I entered the settlement. I approached a Polish woman, told her my predicament and asked whether she would be willing to give me shelter. Although she was very frightened she took me to a stable. I stayed there and rested on hay that night and the following day. She brought me food and some fat to smear on my legs to ease the pain. Fat was a very scarce commodity. She was depriving herself of a luxury and I was very grateful. During that day she went out to work but in the evening she brought me some food. She also brought me the unwelcome news that guards with dogs had visited the settlement looking for me. She became increasingly afraid. It was no longer safe for me to stay there and it was not safe for her to be found hiding me.

It occurred to me at this time that the guard's dogs must have lost my scent otherwise I would have been discovered in that settlement. My main hope was that having done this they would return to Piezmog and give up the chase. However, even if this happened, I knew that my description would have been circulated to other local commissars in the region and I would still need to take care. I would also need a great deal of luck.

The Polish woman brought me the identity document of a Polish man who had died there. His document had not been surrendered to the authorities and they had been able to claim his

bread rations. She also gave me some bread and a small bag of oats. So as not to give the lady any more distress I thanked her and told her that if she went to the settlement from which I had come and saw Karol, told him I was o.k. he would give her food. I left that night to continue my journey. Such kindness in such austere living conditions and times was overwhelming. It renewed my faith in the patriotism of my compatriots and women.

My new identity was a man born in 1910 called Wladislaw Kizim from Lvov. Although I was 12 years younger than he I must have aged that amount since leaving Poland just over two years previously. During my rest in the stable I had sketched out a rough plan of my next move. I had heard that there was an organized, Polish army but I didn't know where they were. I would head for the Polish delegate (embassy) at Syktyvkar, which had opened with permission of the Russian authorities. They would be the likeliest people to supply me with the whereabouts of the Polish army. The Polish woman had given me directions on how to get to Syktyvkar by following the course of the River Vychegda. There were, as always, snags. On one bank of the river further down was a Concentration camp and on the other side was the main thoroughfare leading to Syktyvkar. It would be dangerous to travel down either side of the river but she suggested that there would be some boats belonging to the local fishermen along the bank and that I should row down the river.

Surreptitiously roaming along the bank in the darkness, I soon came upon a fisherman's boat. There were no oars but I found a piece of wood, which would act as a paddle. I launched into the middle of the wide river and as I set off, a lone figure paddling downstream, I realized that even at night I would be highly visible from either bank. Not only that, but I would look extremely suspicious and attract just the attention that I was trying to avoid. I seemed trapped. Danger to left, danger to right, danger in the middle. While I considered my new predicament I

laid down in the boat. Unwittingly I had found the answer. Lay low and let the current take the boat downstream.

Therefore, travelling prone and only occasionally checking to see that the boat was in the centre of the river I made my leisurely way towards the town. Anybody catching sight of the boat would automatically assume that it was a drifting boat which had come loose further upstream. It was a nerve-racking journey. I held my breath every time I heard voices on the bank. Would I be discovered? Relief when all was again quiet.

I passed the time in the boat memorising my new particulars. It would be fatal to hesitate if challenged; I had to know them perfectly. I had to forget my own identity and believe in my new one. My life and freedom could depend on it. As it became light in the morning I had to bring the boat to the bank and hide it in the reeds. My daylight hours would have to be spent hiding in the forest that bordered the river. As I only had a small piece of bread and the bag of oats, which the Polish woman had given me, I scoured the forest to find berries and mushrooms. I was so desperate that I ate leaves as well. When I felt sufficiently distant from any civilisation, I found a reasonably well-covered spot and lay down. I fell into a fitful sleep keeping one ear open to listen for the dogs. I didn't actually hear any, but I could never be sure that barking had not been the cause of my waking. I would listen for quite some time before fading away once more into oblivion. When darkness came I returned to the river and my boat, which mercifully had not been discovered, and launched into midstream once more.

I continued to rehearse my new particulars. Wladislaw Kizim from Lvov. Born 1910. Thirty-two years old. They had to come out naturally if I was challenged. Wladislaw Kizim from Lvov. Wladislaw Kizim born 1910. Wladislaw Kizim age thirty-two. It became almost a chant accompanied by the water lapping against the boat. Wladislaw Kizim from Lvov.

It eventually became obvious that I was nearing Syktyvkar. There was quite a lot of water traffic and I deemed it more prudent to finish the journey on foot. It was also beginning to get light. I paddled the boat towards the bank and jumped out. A drifting boat would cause less suspicion than one in the reeds so I pushed it out into the middle of the river to continue its journey downstream. I decided that if I developed a heavy limp I would be less likely to be suspected of being a fugitive. I copied Stefan's limp, which was very pronounced and very distinctive. (I can still imitate it almost fifty years later.) I had plenty of time to practice it on my approaches to the town. The timber yards and sawmills on the outskirts became my first objective. Rather than skirt them I went through. People were going about their own business and took no notice of me and I was beginning to enjoy and feel confident about my charade.

Fate has a habit of shattering my complacency. Just as I cleared one of the timber yards a police officer appeared unexpectedly from behind a building taking me by surprise. I couldn't turn back, that would have been stupid. I had to brazen it out. He challenged me. He asked me my name and my particulars and inspected my documents.

"Wladislaw Kizim from Lvov."

So far, so good.

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to the Polish embassy. I am sick and tired of them. They don't look after us. They are churlish and unsympathetic. Look."

I pointed to the meagre bag of oats I was carrying.

"Just look at what the Polish aid distributors call food. It wouldn't fill a mouse. I am totally disgusted with them and I'm going to have it out with them. I'm not standing for this."

"Where do you work?"

I hadn't bargained for this question.

"I work in this timber yard."

Fortunately for me he didn't check this out. Fortunately he didn't detect my shaking knees. He returned my papers and sent me on my way.

I was very pleased with myself. This incident had gone very well. Maybe I was a more convincing liar than I had thought. I had really got into character. I chuckled to myself as I walked along the track towards the town. I would have to watch it though. There was a danger that I might have overdone it a bit.

When I reached the Polish delegate I was very relieved. Now I would be safe. They would look after me. I entered the building jubilantly. Against all the odds I had escaped and although I had no illusions about everything now being plain sailing, I felt that I had left the worst behind me. I explained my situation to the Polish people there. My reception was not as welcoming as I had expected. I had the distinct impression that they wished I had not come and that I represented a threat to their establishment. They showed more fear than I did. Was fate once more kicking me in the teeth?

I was very cross at their apparent reluctance to give me any assistance. Another blow to my belief in Polish patriotism. I thrashed about in my mind trying to find some argument, some reason to persuade them to help me. My spirits were sinking fast. Who else would help me if they wouldn't? I remembered the incident of the Colonel's daughter. I was indignant that here was I, who had saved this girl from starvation and death, and there they were trying to ignore my pleas. This outburst did the trick. They remembered the young girl passing through the delegate on her way to join the Polish Army. She had told them about the help that Karol and I had given her. Her father, the Colonel must have been a quite important personage and suddenly they were now prepared to help me.

I was taken to a small room. The carpet was lifted up to reveal a trap door in the floor. The trap door led into a small secret room, a closet, with just sufficient space for one person to sit in reasonable comfort. This was to be my refuge for the time being and so that the hiding place remained secret I was advised not to make any noise. I felt reasonably safe here.

I stayed for several days hidden in this small bunker under the floor. When the coast was clear they brought me food and allowed me out to visit the toilet. The rest was most welcome and I took full advantage of my sojourn here.

Eventually I was given a document that stated that I was a schoolteacher travelling to take up a new post at a school in Letka near the area's southern border under my new identity, Wladislav Kizim. I had asked them whether they could give me other false identity papers as the ones I had were for a man 12 years older than I, but they couldn't. This was as much as they could do for me. I would have to take my chance. They had had to use all their persuasion, together with copious bribes in order to get this document stamped by the Russian authorities. The officials at the delegate told me that transport had been provided to take volunteers to the recruiting area and that the previous train had left from Muraczy. There was no guarantee that any further trains would leave from there, but there was a strong possibility.

I was then taken to a warehouse, which turned out to be a veritable Aladdin's cave. I was amazed to see piles upon piles of clothing and sacks of flour, obviously undistributed aid for the Polish people in that area. I was given a long black coat that had metal buttons with the letters N.F.S. on it that I later discovered were the initials of the British National Fire Service. I asked why this aid was stockpiled and was not being distributed to the needy Polish people in the area. It made me very angry to be told that they couldn't give it to the needy as they had to use it to bribe the Russians. I was upset when I thought that my papers, so recently

rubber-stamped, had probably been obtained through the misuse of this aid. I was disgusted that men of my country could be so greedy and possessive, so unconcerned at the plight of Polish exiles who were starving whilst the aid sent from other countries to alleviate their suffering was being used to pay bribes to their oppressors. I think the donors, had they known, would also have been sickened.

I can only suppose that the Russian mentality had surreptitiously insinuated itself into their sense of fair play. Expedience had taken precedence over morality and made them no better than their enemies.

CHAPTER 19

Letka, the place where I was supposed to take up my non-existent teaching post was some 450 kilometres distant. I was glad to be on my way and to have a definite goal. My documents would allow me to travel virtually to the borderline of the Komi SSR region. From there on to cross to another region I would be on my own with no legitimate documents. My next destination was to be a small town called Muraszy where there was a railway terminal.

My original intention had been to go by river as there was a waterbus operating a transport service. The Polish delegate in Syktyvkar advised me most strongly not to take this route. There were too many police milling about and my chances of getting stopped and questioned were extremely high. It would be much safer to travel by road where there would be less official activity. I took their advice and was given directions on how to reach Letka.

My aim on this long journey was to walk at least the distance from one village to the next each day. The area was flat with less forestry. Much of the land either side of the rough tracks, which were the main thoroughfares between villages, was given over to fields and farms. It was possible to see for miles around and I now walked leisurely along as if out for a pleasant stroll. I had abandoned my counterfeit limp when I left the Polish delegate in Syktyvkar.

When I reached a village, I offered to carry out work in exchange for food. I gave them various reasons for my travelling through. Sometimes I was a travelling teacher or a man going to join the army or any other story that suited the situation. There was little danger in the villages as most of the men had been called up to the army and the populations were mainly Komi women. Occasionally I would chop wood, this being the only

work required. At other times I would play on the women's sympathy, comparing my needs with those of their absent husbands who would certainly get hospitality if they were in Poland. I was always a good talker and was never without food for any length of time. The Komi farmers were a little better off than other workers and were always willing to spare bread for a poor Polish traveller. I was now quite happy with my assumed identity and felt much safer, although I very rarely stayed overnight in the villages for fear of discovery.

My sleeping quarters during this journey varied from place to place. I would try to find some secluded and sheltered place away from the road. It could be a haystack or a Potato dugout; a hedge or a clump of bushes. I wasn't over-fussy about my cleanliness. I reasoned that the grubbiness could disguise the twelve-year gap that might become my undoing.

On one of my journeys between villages I caught up with a young man sporting the uniform of the educational establishment at Piezmog. I walked some of the way with him and although I recognised him I was uncertain whether he had recognised me. If he did I could be in deep trouble. I had a knife in my pocket. Maybe I should cut his throat. I steered the conversation round to his uniform. He told me he had transferred to a school at Syktyvkar. I casually asked when he had left Piezmog. Relief. He had left quite some time before my arrest. It was unlikely that the news had travelled this far. Had he known he would definitely have reported me. He accompanied me for some time chatting casually unaware of how close he had been to death. I was not sorry when he turned off the road. Although I was pretty certain he knew nothing of my position it had been an uneasy companionship.

My journey, although long, was carried out at a leisurely pace. I did not intend to call attention to myself by running like a fugitive. I was going from one place to another like any normal

citizen, stopping when I felt like a rest at the side of the road and leaving it only to find a suitable place to sleep. In the couple of weeks or so that I had been on the road I had encountered only the one possible danger previously described. I gained confidence step by step.

Maybe I was getting a little over-confident. Whenever I had in the past felt too self-assured fate had stepped in with a timely gesture to undermine my security.

I was well over three-quarters of the way to my destination when I saw a lorry. Hoping to get a lift I stood at the side of the track and watched it approach. The lorry stopped for me to get in. It wasn't until it was too late that I recognised its occupants - six police officers. It shook me rigid. When fate wants to tell me something it tells me in style. My mind worked overtime. I had to be casual. I had to be confident. I had to hide my fear. I had to think carefully before speaking.

I smiled and said hello. I was asked to produce my documents, which they examined and kept hold of. They started asking me where I was going and what I was doing. I got the feeling that I was being interrogated. I felt that they would be very suspicious of me and I realised that my story had to be very convincing. I told them I was going to Letka to take up a teaching post there. Eventually they told me to climb on the lorry with them as they were heading that way. It would have looked even more suspicious if I had refused their offer so with lots of misgivings I got in the back of the lorry and nodded my thanks.

I tried to look calm and unconcerned as they talked in a language that was unfamiliar to me. I didn't know what they were saying but it seemed fairly obvious that they were discussing me. It was nerve-racking, but I put a brave face on it and talked to them casually without showing my fear. Fortunately they were so arrogant and unworldly that the questions they asked me were not designed to test out my ability as a teacher, but were

of a standard that any 2nd year student could have answered. I had no way of knowing whether they were suspicious of me. Were they considering that I looked much younger than thirty-two? I had a feeling my fate was in the balance. They were testing me. Watching me to see if I panicked or showed any sign of inconsistency. At the end of the day after a twenty five to thirty mile journey they reached their destination. After further discussion in their own language we all got out of the lorry and they invited me to join them in a meal. I dared not refuse, although I was desperate to be away from them and any possible doubts they may harbour. I deemed it prudent to appear friendly and unafraid.

We ate our meal and I was then invited to share their lodgings for the night. Again I went along with it. We slept on the floor in a large room in the police station. I must have passed their tests or maybe I was no longer an interesting diversion to toss backwards and forwards like a ping-pong ball as my documents were returned to me the following morning. They wished me good luck on the remainder of my journey. I thanked them for the lift and the hospitality and set off along the road.

I walked leisurely and casually, turning once to wave farewell, until I was over the brow of the hill. Immediately I was out of their sight I ran like hell. I was grateful to God for being on my side, obviously the police officers had found nothing untoward in my affairs

Letka was my next stop. This was my first contact with Polish people since leaving Syktyvkar and my official destination. There was a sort of delegate here and I made my way there to decide my next moves. I told the man there that I had been sent from Syktyvkar and that I was going to join the Polish Army. I started to tell him that I was on the run but he said not to say any more, it was better that he did not know. He couldn't give me any official papers to cross the border but he thought I would have

little trouble, as Muraszy was only a few kilometres away. There were many Polish families living there where I could get shelter, and I would blend in with the surroundings.

I stayed in Letka for a couple of days and then crossed the border into the next shire without incident. It was only another two or three days walk to Muraszy. On the way I met a Polish man about my age who was also on his way to Muraszy to re join his family who lived there. It was nice to have a companion for this last leg of the journey and we discussed the war and any news. He also shared his food with me. Although he was a Polish man I couldn't risk telling him the truth and he knew me as Wladislaw Kizim. In fact I was almost convinced that this was my name by now.

When we reached Muraszy we went to his family house and I stayed there for a few days, sleeping in a hayloft. Here I sent a letter to Karol under a false name but one that I hoped he would recognise. The letter was to let him know that I was all right and advising him to get away if at all possible. The news was that the Russians would be closing the Polish delegations and time was running short. The Polish man's wife and mother helped me by telling me the latest news and also where to go to find the recruiting officer. The recruiting officer introduced himself as a Captain of the Polish Reserves. He asked my name, where I was from, where I had been to school, what I was doing in Russia. I told him I had been in a Concentration camp and, to enhance my chances, that I had been a Corporal in the Polish air force. He asked

"What squadron?"

"Krakow 2nd Airforce Division."

As he was from East Poland I was pretty sure he would know nothing much about this squadron. My story was accepted. I was a little taken aback when he said

"Let's see if you know military muster."

Luckily I had been in the scouts as a boy and knew the main commands so I passed the test, maybe not with flying colours but adequately.

The train would be leaving in a couple of days. There were about fifty people waiting to leave and all their particulars had to be listed. The list then had to be vetted and approved by the Russians. This must have been very much a formality, but no one could go very far in Russia without the official stamp. We were provided with one cattle truck for all fifty and this was to serve us as our home for many weeks. There had been eighty in the truck when we were being transported to the Concentration camp so there was just a little more room on this journey. I don't suppose we would have cared how squashed up we were as long as the train was taking us south and eventually away from Russia. The truck was part of a long goods train with both open and closed wagons and the only guard was the railway guard. So we began our long journey across Russia to the South.

We had been given two sacks of bread to see us to our first stop. Whenever the train stopped at a large town, some of our number would go to the Polish delegate there to scrounge food for the next leg of the journey. At every stop we heard rumours that the Russians were going to close the Polish delegates and as we progressed the rumours became fact. Some delegates had already closed and for others the closure was imminent. It was almost as if the train was just keeping ahead of the clamp down and was pulling the plug out as it passed.

There was a certain amount of panic creeping in as we wondered what the Russians were up to. Would they stop the train and revoke our free passage? Would these clampdowns overtake us? As we neared Moscow there were cookhouses at the stations to feed the troops. The Poles were also entitled to get food here. We were well fed and well treated by the Russian

army who, unlike the police, were uninfluenced by local politicians.

Just before the train pulled in at one of these stations and it was slowing down passing over a level crossing I saw Murzyn, the Chief Engineer from the prison camp. He was in military uniform and was standing at the crossing with his regiment waiting to cross the track. I shouted to him and we conversed for a short while, he walking alongside the track until he could go no further. We wished each other luck and waved goodbye. I was pleased to see him not only alive, but reinstated to his former rank.

When the train got near Moscow our wagon was put into a railway siding and for a few days we were fed and looked after by the Russian army. We were warned not to leave the station. The Russians were panic stricken about German spies. Consequently anybody wandering about, particularly foreigners were liable to be shot. At the time the Germans were very near Moscow and that was causing the hysteria. We saw many Russian refugees being shunted from one place to another. Confusion was everywhere. Eventually we were transferred to another goods train, which then bypassed Moscow, and we continued our Southward journey. The delay in Moscow had been more than a little worrying and I breathed a sigh of relief that we were once more on our way.

As a military unit wherever we stopped we were entitled to be fed by the local authorities. Obviously with the shortages that the Russians suffered everywhere, food was very limited and we had to supplement our rations by selling pieces of our Western clothing that was very much in demand by the Russians.

On one occasion we stopped in a large town and were put into a siding. Being hungry, we started searching through the open wagons stationed there, looking for food. A few stupid men broke seals on one of the closed wagons and found inside a cargo of perfume. Unfortunately for them they had been observed and

reported to the local police. The police arrived and ordered us all out of the wagon. We were all searched and three men were found to be in possession of the perfumes. They were charged with stealing then led away. I never saw them again. This taught us a lesson, not to risk scavenging on other trains again or at least be extremely careful. For my part, my freedom was of far greater importance to me than a few extra scraps of food.

At times we would go long distances without stopping at any stations and then the train would suddenly stop in the middle of no-mans land. Here water would be taken on board by pump from a local stream. As it was now getting warmer we would persuade the engine driver to delay for a time while we stripped off and bathed in the stream. The engine drivers were cooperative, friendly souls and were happy to have company on their long journey for once.

The further south we went, the warmer the weather became. Most of us only wore trousers, the rest of our clothes and shoes having been sold along the way. By climbing on top of the cattle truck and jumping from wagon to wagon we could travel the length of the train. Indeed we very rarely slept in the truck preferring to find an open wagon carrying timber. Occasionally the engine driver would stop and bring us buckets of boiling water to drink or make the imitation apple and pear core Russian tea.

As with all gatherings of people there are always the odd bad eggs. Two of our number, claiming to be Polish Officers would always volunteer to go to the delegates for food. The first time they came back after quite a long absence with nothing, saying the delegate was closed, we accepted it. The second time it happened we noticed how content and well fed they seemed. The third time they were followed. It was all too apparent. They had been selling the food on the black market in the local town and pocketing the proceeds. No wonder they were the only ones still with a full set of clothing. They certainly didn't go a fourth time.

One of these so-called Polish Officers had a beautiful pair of riding boots, which were his pride and joy and were never out of his sight. In order to get our own back another and myself plotted to steal these boots. When the officer slept he laid his head on the boots and it was my job to steal them. I arranged to sleep next to him, and as the wagon was very crowded it was natural that on turning over he would be nudged occasionally. It took a long time to ease the boots out from under him but with perseverance easing and nudging I managed to remove one and pass it to my partner in crime and eventually I removed the other.

We had no plan of what to do once the boots were in our possession. I stuck one down my trouser leg and my friend did the same. It had taken nearly all night to do the dastardly deed and it was beginning to get light. Luck was on our side. The train started slowing down. We were obviously near a station. A station meant houses and people. We jumped off the train and made our way on foot to the village. There was a market place there and we exchanged the boots for bread and some money. Being in the south there was fruit for sale and I bought a large watermelon that we sliced and ate greedily. It was juicy and sweet, and although not very filling, a reminder of home and civilisation.

Feeling pretty pleased with ourselves we returned to the station to re-board the train. It wasn't there. It had either only stopped for a short time or maybe it hadn't stopped there at all. The stationmaster to whom we related our misfortune was very helpful and informed us that another train was due very shortly, a passenger train, going in the same direction. We boarded this train and paid our fare (train fares were extremely cheap in Russia) and we were once more on our way.

A couple of stations further along we caught up with our train and re-boarded. We were accused of stealing the boots but denied it. We asked when they had been taken and stated in our

defence that we had left the train before that time. It was pretty obvious to everyone what had happened, and they were pleased that the officers had got their just desserts. We used the roubles at the next stop to buy food for us all.

It seemed as though we had reached our destination when the train pulled in at a station and Soldiers sporting Polish eagles on their caps, beckoning us and saying, greeted us, "Come on lads, you've arrived."

Two things mystified us. The soldiers were wearing Russian uniforms and the Polish eagles had no crown. We were dubious and held back. They tried to insist that we get out of the train and join them. Luckily for us one of their number, a Polish boy, shouted a warning. This was the Russian Polish Army, not General Anders Polish army. He had been fooled by the Polish eagles and had joined them unwittingly. He told us not to make the same mistake. When they tried once more to insist we told them,

"Bugger off!"

The train then pulled slowly out of the station and we had thankfully escaped the trap.

Our journey took us alongside the Aral Sea and on towards Tashkent.

Eventually we reached our destination, which was Shachryziab. There we had our first good shower and we scrubbed away the Russian psychological and physical dirt. We shaved and disinfected ourselves. A brief medical gave me A category and I was assimilated into OMZ 6DP Division.

Uniforms were issued including underwear. I felt civilized for the first time since leaving Poland on 1st January 1940. The uniforms were fatigue battledress, thin khaki material, British army issue. They felt good. At last I had reached my goal and could now relax my tensed body. The full army kit of blankets, shaving tackle, belts, etc were issued and we were allocated to our

platoon tents. The tents were located in an orchard that was irrigated by a canal. The weather being very hot this canal was used regularly for swimming during my stay.

I felt confident enough now to revert to my own name and so sought the advice of one of the Polish officers. I told him scant details of my reasons for the deception. He reminded me that we were still in Russia and there could still be informers and sympathisers around. It was better to keep up the alias until the Russian border was well behind me.

A few days later whole unit was marched to the railway station, loaded into wagons and transported to Krasnovodsk on the east shore of the Caspian Sea. Barbed wire and Russian guards surrounded the camp on the shore and I felt that once more I was in a concentration camp. The tents were very large Russian tents and our movements were limited to the interior of the barbed wire perimeter. We wondered what was going on.

Whilst there I went to the cookhouse to find some water to drink. I was directed to the rear of the tent where there was supposed to be a tank of sweet water. I took a basin full and without inspecting it took a large mouthful and swallowed it. Too late I realised it was not sweet water but salt water. I vomited, but not long after started feeling unwell, shivering and feeling sick. On going to the first aid tent I was diagnosed as having malaria and given quinine. The doctor advised me to try to fight it because if I had to be taken to a Russian hospital it would be goodbye escape from Russia this time round.

The Russians were totally in charge of this camp. We were broken into groups and thoroughly searched and then moved to the other side of the camp. From here we had to pass through a narrow gateway flanked either side by barbed wire and Russian guards until we came to a small building where the Commissars were checking everyone. Our identity papers, which had been surrendered to the Polish recruiting office, had obviously been

handed over to the Commissars. Every man was individually scrutinised and questioned and either allowed to continue over the brow and down to the ship or taken out who knows where. They had photographs of people with whom they still had a score to settle - maybe they had one of me. I was feeling dizzy but managed to keep going. One of the guards asked if I was feeling all right. I said I was. It was only a stomach-ache. I was lucky and on my way to the ship.

Once more fate had done me a good turn. The bout of malaria had made me look haggard disguising my age and deceiving the guards.

CHAPTER 20

I walked over the brow of the bank and descended towards the ship. I shook the Russian soil from my feet. The Russian police had dogged me at every turn and every time I had relaxed and felt myself to be safe they had leapt out to challenge my mental ease. I had been tested time and time again but had come through.

The ship was in the style of a large oil tanker and men were being packed like sardines in the open hold. There was a Polish Military Policeman at the gangplank who looked acutely embarrassed when I approached. With good reason. It was my so-called friend who had stolen my shoes in Piezmog and had left Karol and I out of his plans for leaving. I tackled him with it. His excuse was that he thought we would both be reluctant to leave and so we had not been asked. There was no point in pursuing the matter further and I boarded the ship.

Twenty-four hours later we were being disembarked at Pahlavi. The date was 27th August 1942. Polish military officers questioned us. The first thing they wanted to confirm was that we were who we said we were. There was a possibility that Russian spies would try to pass themselves off as Polish citizens and the authorities had to be sure. I now reverted to my own name. It was a little like giving a potted biography of the past two and a half years. I was asked to name people I had been with in the Concentration camp. They were interested in how the Russians lived. How the Polish people lived in Russia. How friendly were they with the Russians. Did I know any Polish defectors or informers. I went through quite a concentrated third degree interrogation. Today we would call it a de-briefing.

I had really begun my career as a soldier. It was a relief to be back to my own identity and I started to settle in. On and off I had attacks of malaria but kept them under control by dosing with

quinine. There was no medical advice given to us about diet and I and many others suffered from jaundice. I think it must have been caused by eating too much fat namely margarine. My starved body could not cope with it. The margarine was part of the dry rations we were issued with and being in an extremely hot climate the margarine liquefied. When I opened my tin it ran like water and it was such a treat that I poured it over the bread and ate it all in one go. I suffered for my ignorance but was a little more careful in future to take things gradually until my stomach could cope with normal food.

The camp was situated on the shore and, because of the state of many of the recruits, was more like a hospital than a military establishment. We rested here for two weeks, regaining our strength and health. I met many acquaintances there that had been in the same prisons and camps as I had. We compared notes and recounted our adventures as we gained our strength. Whilst we camped here we saw no more recruits arrive. It was not long before the news reached us that we were the last Polish people to leave Russia to join General Anders army. Those left behind were forced to join the Russian Polish army.

Had all my trials and tribulations been to fulfil some greater plan? Had I been destined to be amongst the last Poles to leave Russia? Had someone up there considered that I needed one helluva shove? If so, in spite of everything that had happened to me, I was grateful.

A fortnight later the whole Unit set off for Iraq - destination Khanaqin.

The camp at Khanaqin was a stony desert, the land undulating and bare apart from a few weeds popping up now and then. It covers about 8 square kilometres. A small river runs nearby bordered by some little greenery. We pitched our tents and surrounded them with foul smelling oil to keep out the scorpions that are everywhere. The oil was also spread around

inside the tent. It didn't have a very pleasant aroma but that was preferable to the sting of a scorpion.

In spite of all the precautions many of us suffered scorpion stings. They still managed to creep into our tents. I was stung on the finger one day when unfolding my blankets to make my bed. The scorpion was hiding between the folds. It was extremely painful, like being stung by a dozen wasps, but contrary to popular opinion was not fatal. The doctor treated it with antiseptic and I lived. Many people were stung. None died of their stings. It was said that scorpion stings were more dangerous in the rainy season but whether that was true I never found out.

There were two separate units organised at Khanaqin, tanks and artillery. I was in the Tank Brigade. I still hankered after joining the Airforce and when a circular arrived at the camp asking for volunteers to the Polish Airforce I applied. I was interviewed by the adjutant of my unit and turned down. I was very disappointed.

Our work consisted of collecting stones and laying them out to make roads or fashioning Polish eagles and flowers from stones decorating the ground. It seemed to me a foolish and purposeless occupation, often entailing a tank carrier travelling with 20 men around the area collecting stones on one occasion to build an ornamental wall separating two Divisions. The tragedy was that all this effort would be wasted when in a short time the unit would move to another area. It was an even worse tragedy that the decorating would start all over again. It would have made more sense for the men to attend lectures and classes to advance the education which many of the soldiers lacked.

In Iraq and Iran at that time there were hundreds of camps - Hindus, British and Polish. Thousands of troops ready for action in Africa, Italy, India and Burma. Many were protecting the colony's oil wells. Lorries would often go many miles visiting other camps in the country. We would be occasionally offered

places on this transport. There were even the odd football matches between camps. I saw quite a few Hindu and British camps in the area, all very neat and tidy, but none showed any signs of the eccentricity of the Polish camps and their graphic stone laying.

Our training went on every day. Parades, fatigues, rifle practice (without ammunition) moulding us into disciplined soldiers. In November I was moved to another camp in the same area for the 2nd Tank Brigade and we started preparing for winter. I had been here two months. I had tried for a second time to join the Airforce but had again been turned down.

Winter meant the rainy season. Trenches had to be dug round the tents. Some men were making bricks to line a basin that had been dug to collect water for the cookhouse. The whole place was a hive of activity trying to get everything finished before the rains came. I had started keeping a diary of events and the entry for 16th November 1942 stated 'Our new Polish Army is somewhat different to the old one. The horses have been replaced by motorised transport. I hope that this new army will gain our freedom.'

The following day the rains came and for several days our activities were severely curtailed. I was detailed to the Medical Health Company in the 2nd Tank Brigade but had again applied for the Airforce. Although still in the army I was seconded with the Medical corps to the airforce unit and was hopeful of being accepted this time.

On the anniversary of the November Rebellion we were visited by Generals Paszkiewicz and Tokazewski and entertained by a band and artistes from Warsaw. It made us feel a little nearer home and was a welcome diversion from our normal activities. The following day I was working in the administration block making an alphabetical list of all the personnel in the company.

The scourge of the camps, after the scorpions, was the Poker game. I played it once and considered it a horrible game (I must have lost). It was officially forbidden because of the resentment and anger it caused when men lost all their pay, therefore it went on all day, every day.

Diary 7th December 1942. 'Today I am in the 2nd School Company. This consists mainly of youngsters who have never previously served in the forces. Every day we have lectures consisting of maths, geometry, physics, engineering and also use of firearms and sentry duties. To-day there is a rumour that my effort to join the airforce has been thwarted but I do not know whether it is true. If it is true, I have had not one drop of luck so far and I don't know what I am living for. I am cursing my luck and the date of my birth. I am cursing my life.'

I must have been getting very frustrated with my efforts to join the Airforce and the more I was turned down the more obsessional I became. It was rumoured that only those who were not wanted in the Unit were allowed to transfer. It was a way of getting rid of the riff raff.

A week later I was in front of the Airforce Commission and was accepted. I would soon be transferred to air service as a pilot. I was overjoyed. It was the best Christmas present I could have had. I was at last going to achieve my boyhood ambition. Ever since the time I had witnessed the pilot of an aircraft stepping out of his crashed plane I had not wavered from my intention.

On Christmas eve the whole of the 2nd Tank Brigade assembled on the parade ground. The Generals broke the Christmas bread with us and wished us a joyful and happy Christmas. In the evening there is feasting and drinking. The following day, Christmas day we attended a festive Service. Most of my friends were either drunk or extremely merry. There was no shortage of alcohol about.

The next month or so was spent with other Airforce candidates at the Collecting Depot. One of my friends, Stanislaw Takarski from the 9th Company was there also - he reminded me so much of my Krakow friend Stanislaw Front. We had some good laughs together, especially when he started to grow a moustache to go with his new airforce image.

The routine was very much the same, marching, lectures, physical training, parades, football matches. Many of the candidates started to learn English but I decided to wait until I was actually on my way to Britain. Whether it was laziness or a subconscious attempt not to tempt fate I do not know.

At last on the 4th February 1943 we were packed and ready to go. In the afternoon General Anders reviewed the embarking troops and made a speech. This was a very moving moment for me enhanced by an event which happened while we were wandering about just before the parade. I spotted my Cousin Gerard, who I had last seen in Odessa. We had a very emotional meeting. He told me his brother Alfons had escaped capture by the Russians and had managed to return to Krakow. Time was short, less than half an hour. No time for any long explanations. We had both come out of the abyss. We were both alive and that was enough for now. We just hugged each other. We would meet again in the very near future in Britain. That was something to really look forward to.

Our lorries moved off towards the railway station. We boarded the train for Baghdad. The following day we were marched in closed ranks through the centre of the capital, over a bridge across the Tigris to another railway station to continue our journey. From what I saw of Baghdad I considered it a beautiful town with its Mosques and minarets, its eastern style houses, its boulevards and palm trees, its river teeming with any number and variety of craft. The local people were very curious, wondering who we were and where we were going. Altogether a fascinating

and magnificent place which I was sorry not to have been able to explore.

The following day we reached the port of Basra and were immediately transferred to a boat. We sailed from Basra the day after, 7th February 1943, from the estuary of the Tigris and Euphrates, past continuous gardens of palm trees, beautiful villas and occasional clay and bamboo houses. There were plenty of landing stages along the route large and small and we passed a few American ships standing at anchor. Early afternoon we also dropped anchor, waiting until nightfall to sail through the Persian Gulf.

That night we set sail under orders for total silence. The phosphorescent creatures in the sea fascinated me. It was an eerie, muzzled quietness, with the engines chugging rhythmically through the calm water. A ghost ship. What the reason for this silence was I do not know. There must have been some reason for keeping the troop movements secret during these few hours in the Gulf but no one felt inclined to enlighten us. The following morning the order was lifted.

Our main horizon for the next two days was a rocky shore and coastline that looked beautiful in the bright sunlight. The only other craft we saw were small sailing and fishing boats. During our third day at sea we sailed through the Straits of Ormuz and heading for the Arabian Sea.

We docked at the port of Bandar Abbas and traders trying to sell us their produce, mainly fruit, invaded the boat. The British men tried to deter them by turning hoses on them. But they were used to such tactics and continued their trade. The Hindus on the boat, who were not over fond of the British because of the way they were ill-treated by them, were trying to learn some Polish words. They were surprised that the Poles, white men, accepted them as equals.

After an overnight stop we left Bandar Abbas port in a convoy of 30 ships escorted by two torpedo boats. Some of the ships had passengers but most were tankers and cargo vessels. The Persian coast was still visible until the evening when we started to move away from it and reached the Arabian Sea. Suddenly men started feeling seasick. I felt rather light headed but that was all. We were on our way to Bombay in a boat aptly named 'Islam'.

The weather was getting hotter and hotter and while on this voyage we were issued with our tropical uniforms and cork helmets. While the sun shone relentlessly down, the sea got rougher and rougher. Those who had recovered from their first bout of seasickness succumbed once more together with a few who resisted including myself. During the late afternoon the sun disappeared and there was thick fog all around obliterating all but the adjacent ships. It continued to thicken until we saw nothing. The sea was getting mad and we were all vomiting in turn.

The following day was Sunday, the fog had disappeared, the sun shone and the sea was calm. Boredom was setting in. There was nothing to do and it was too hot for comfort on deck. Many people were suffering violent headaches. To relieve some of the boredom we formed a choir and practised singing the Polish Airforce march in unison.

Ten days after setting off from Iraq we were ordered to start packing our belongings. We were obviously approaching land. By lunchtime we saw mountains on the horizon, by mid afternoon we saw the port and the buildings. The sea became busy with all kinds of craft and lighted buoys. At the approach to the harbour a lighthouse stood near some rocks separating the port from the rest of the bay. The city was to the left of the port and I could see quite clearly tall buildings and mosques. To the right of the port was a wild looking rocky coastline with small islands scattered about.

The tug guided us into harbour passing forests of palm, a tall tower (possibly a water tower) and a Gothic style church or monastery clashing with all the other buildings. Berthed in front of us was the Polish ship Kosciuszko. At first we were not allowed to disembark but eventually we had to leave the ship as the toilets on board had been locked up. Even then we were marched in convoy there and back. The British and the Hindus were allowed much more freedom and were roaming about. Only the Poles were under discipline. Our landing was not to take place until the following morning after a frustrating night on board.

On leaving the ship we were marched to the railway station and on to a waiting train. The only glimpse of Bombay other than that from the sea was through the train windows. I saw beautiful villas, then poverty and dirt. Beautiful modern buildings then dirty industrial areas. My impression was of a city of contrasts. Of rich and poor.

Our train, which was electrically driven, passed through a mountainous area, then palm forests and rocky outcrops. The scenery reminded me of the American Wild West films, very similar to that of parts of southern Russia. Six hours later we arrived at our Indian destination. Deolali.

The march to the camp, which was a military rest camp, was through avenues of palms and was very pleasant. Hundreds and hundreds of nicely built barracks awaited us there. Services such as cleaning and sweeping our quarters, cleaning and polishing our boots, black or brown skinned people carried out washing up after meals, washing laundry. We've never had it so good.

For a few days we did very little. I even had time to explore the local town. Although I found nothing of great interest there the beautiful fabrics on sale in the shops struck me. There were the inevitable football games and one day I borrowed a friend's

camera and took some photographs of the area and the garrison chapel. Our stay here was just one week and the evening before we left our commanding officer organised a forced 20-kilometre march. This came like a bolt out of the blue and took us unawares. We had got used to the languid style of life. We had been extremely well looked after by the Indians and, apart from this one jolt to our torpidity, did nothing but rest.

Our day of departure found us awakened at 3 a.m. and arriving in Bombay by noon. By 3 p.m. we were embarked on a passenger ship manned by the American navy and by the name of 'Mary Posa'. By 6 p.m. the ship was leaving port. Because it was a very large and fast ship with heavy armaments we sailed without a convoy. It had obviously been at some time a luxury liner as traces of ballrooms, dining rooms, mirrors, and paintings were all in evidence. The numerous passengers were mainly Americans and Britains and at times it was difficult to move about on the crowded decks. Below decks were fitted multi-tier hammocks but many of us slept out on deck because of the stuffiness and the heat.

Rumours abounded that locked up down in the bowels of the ship were a number of Italian prisoners of war with a few generals in their number. It was, I understand, common practice to carry prisoners of war in this manner so that there was less likelihood of being torpedoed by the enemy. How the information was transferred to the enemy to let them know of this cargo is a mystery to me. No doubt there were ways and means.

The highlight of this journey was watching flying fish leaping around like dragonflies in and out of the water. We stopped for a few days in Capetown where we were allowed to explore the area and do some shopping. Money was not very plentiful so most of it was window-shopping. From there we set sail for Britain.

There were a few occasions when there were alarms because of German U-boats but fortunately we were not attacked and within two weeks of leaving India we had our first glimpse of Britain - the mountains of Scotland. This was to be our home for the rest of the war. Or so we thought at the time. The date was 11th March 1943. The last three and a quarter years were behind me and would haunt me for some time to come as they were relived in the distorted images of nightmares.



1943



Marian in RAF Uniform



Cousin Gerard

POSTSCRIPT

My parents survived the war and died in their late eighties.

My sister Maria also survived and is still living in Poland.

My Cousin Alfons returned to Krakow and continued his nefarious pursuits.

My brother Joseph and my friend Stanislaw Front were both killed by the Polish Communists at the end of the war.

Aunty Anna survived and came out of Auschwitz.

Cousin Henry was taken to Auschwitz and also survived but died shortly after his release.

My dreams of becoming a Pilot were never fulfilled. My bout of malaria precluded me from training in Britain.

I remained in Britain after the war and became a British subject.

Dear Diary

Syktyvkar 70 km to go. The journey I am making is partly in a boat on the river Vychegda or on foot through forests to avoid people. In Syktyvkar I found the Polish delegate where eventually I got a false document to go to Letka some 450 km. The journey I cover mainly by foot. There they direct me to Muraschi where the Polish army transport is supposed to be organised.

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On the way to the army.

A short inspection and I am integrated into the transport. By train we are leaving Muraschi. I am hiding under name of Corporal Vladislav Kizima, born 1910. We are going through Kuybyshev along side Aral Sea, Tashkent to Shachryziab. Arrived there on 3.8.42. Here I am in front of military recruiting commission. I am passing with A category and I am put into OMZ 6DP. I am starting to be a soldier. After 2 weeks we are moved to Krasnovodsk from where across the Caspian sea we come to Persia. The date 27.8.42. The port we are landing in is Pahlavi. We are on the sea shore. We have quite a long rest. On 9.9.42 we are going to Iraq. On 13.9.42 we are passing the frontier and we are reaching Khanaqin. Here I am volunteering for Airforce but I am not accepted. 27.10.42 I am transferred to tank brigade. In this reminiscence I have missed many facts mainly because of the shortage of time. From now on I intend to carry a diary.

10.11.42 - Normal activities

11.11.42 - Reveille 5 am. Breakfast 7.30 Church Parade 9.0 am weather nice A parade to celebrate Poland's Independence Day.

14.11.42 - Saturday -We are moved to another camp to a 2nd tank brigade.

15.11.42 - Sunday - Day free of work.

16.11.42 Because of coming winter making big preparations for rainy season. Trenching the tents. Some of us are making bricks. Digging a basin to collect water for the cookhouse. The supplementary water is pumped from a nearby river. Work is going on everywhere. The place we are staying is a stony desert.

As far as I can see the land undulates and is covered with stone and sand. And here and there are a few odd weeds growing. The only greenery is beside a small river. The camp is covering approximately 8 square km. Our new Polish army is somewhat different to the old one. The horses have been replaced by motorised transport. I hope that this new Polish army will gain our freedom.

17.11.42 - Day free of activities. Pouring with rain all day long.

18.11.42 - Day free

23.11.42 - Sunday - I feel very frustrated. I am wondering whether all this is worth while. I am trying to get into airforce once more and I have found out that I was too late.

27.11.42 - Today for 3rd time I am applying to join the airforce but I have very little hope.

28.11.42 - Friday - I am in the Medical Health Company in the 2nd Tank Brigade but I am hoping that I will be able to break away from here and join the airforce. Many of my friends were selected for driving courses. I am transferred to the airforce unit. I hope I am lucky this time.

30.11.42 - Officers Cadet School Day and also November Rebellion. Church Parade- Military Parade in front of General Paszkiewicz and General Tokazewski. In the evening we had Warsaw Band with Warsaw artists.

1.12.41 Today I am working in the Admin office making alphabetical file of all the company.

3.12.42 - Wednesday - Today I have played first time in Poker School. Its a horrible game (I must have lost). But at the moment this is the scourge of all the camps. They spend most of the time playing Poker consequently we are officially forbidden to play. If we had alternative recreation many of them wouldn't do it. It creates a great deal of resentment in the camp especially when there is cheating and when men lose all their money.

4.12.42 - I am just wondering why during our travels we have seen many British and Hindu camps. They were all very tidy, clean, immaculate. But I haven't seen the stupidity that occurs in ours. With the roads and streets are paved with stones, Polish Eagles and flowers laid in stone and also insignia of individual military units and stones surrounding tents for ornamental purposes. All that takes a lot of manpower to no purpose. Yesterday I witnessed an incident the 20 men allocated to tank carrier to collect stones and load it on a carrier. Travelling 10 km to collect the stones to build fancy wall demarcating the border of the 2nd company. Whilst we were doing that there arrived a British Commission to inspect the camp. The Polish Lieutenant ran to the driver of the truck and told him to hide the truck behind the tents so the British couldn't see what we were up to. The tragedy of it is that we all know that we shall leave this place to move somewhere else and start the process all over again. Wouldn't it make more sense to give the men lectures and classes to educate many of the soldiers who lacked a good education.

7.12.42. Today I am in 2nd School Company. This consists mainly of youngsters who have never previously served in the forces. Every day we have lectures consisting of maths, geometry, physics, engineering, and also use of firearms and sentry duties. Today there is a rumour that my effort to join the airforce has been thwarted but I do not know whether it is true. If

that is true I have not had one drop of luck so far and I don't know what I am living for. I am cursing my luck and the date of my birth. I am cursing on my life.

15.12.42 - Today I have again been in front of the airforce selection commission. I have been accepted and transferred to air service as a pilot.

21.12.42 - Again in front of Commission and I have been accepted at this also.

24.12.42 - Thursday - This is Christmas eve. In the evening we are going in the parade ground where all the 2nd tank brigade has been gathered. The Brigade General - General Paszkiewicz is breaking the Christmas bread with us and then arrives General Tokazewski- The main General of the 6th Panzer Division. He officially wishes the whole brigade and then breaks the bread with the delegations of various units. We are returning to camp where we all sit round the tables and spend Christmas eve.

25.12.42 - Friday Christmas Day. Very Festive Church Service. Most of my friends are drunk - there seems to be no shortage of alcohol.

27.12.42 - Sunday - Today I am on Guard duty around the fuel depots.

8.1.43 - Friday - Khanaqin - Today 4th day among the candidates for the airforce at the collecting depot. We have been told that in a short time we shall begin the journey to Britain. With me there are a few friends. My good friend from the 9th company Stanislaw Tokarski. He reminds me very much of my friend in Poland Stanislaw Front. He is a bit of a scatterbrain and a bit mad

but a very good friend. He is growing a small moustache which makes him look stupid, but I quite like it.

24.1.43 - Sunday - Long time I haven't written anything in my diary. Mainly because nothing interesting has happened. The other reason I am getting a bit lazy. So far we haven't heard anything about our departure. We are sitting doing nothing and getting a bit bored. Truth is we are pretty well occupied. There is no shortage of work. Every day in the morning we have P.T. marching and singing, then we have a lecture and occasionally football matches. The Command varies - some of them are good, some of them are pretty poor officers. The Warrant officer of my unit is very loud but basically a very decent man. The Commanding Officer Lieutenant of our squadron is a very nice man. Some of my friends started learning English. I am leaving my learning till we get on board ship. I am getting really lazy. So far I haven't mentioned at all Polish women. They have their own military units and I suppose eventually will play important role in our military structure. They serve as auxiliary military service. Some of them have a very bad reputation but I am sure there must be a lot of them who are very decent and honest. We also had a very important football match. Poles against English in Baghdad and we won 4 - 0.

25.1.43 - Reveille 6 am - Morning Parade - Breakfast - few kilometres march with singing. Back to camp - maths lecture and dinner. Lecture about firearms - spare time - bed time 8 pm.

26.1.43 - Normal duties - Evening to mess/social tent for coffee. Spent very pleasant evening.

27.1.43 - Lectures - maths, geography, physics - 3 to 4pm dinner. In afternoon lecture about venereal diseases. Evening I spent in

social tent of the 7th DP in the company of my friends. Stephan Navara and Zygmund Szymanski only just joined our unit.

29.1.43 - Friday - We are getting ready for the Sunday- very big military parade with the 7th DP. The whole thing worked out quite well.

30.1.43 - Saturday - PT and shaking of the blankets.

31.1.43 - Sunday - Reveille 6.30 - breakfast - Church parade - Preparation for main military parade. As I am one of the smaller lads I am closing the ranks of the parade. There are 15 men counted off from the back of the parade of which I am No. 1 - We are marched off to the cookhouse to peel the potatoes. Our unit has got 2nd place . Dinner - football match against the Hindu units - Quite a lot of English units came to see the match. No shortage of our people either. Half time 3 - 0 to Hindus. After half time I had to go back to camp as I am duty man and have to collect the dry rations for the unit. I am awaiting the return of my friends to learn the result. We lost 3-2. There is also sound of music and shouting.

1.2.43 - Monday - Today my platoon stayed in bed all day as we had guard duty the previous night. In afternoon we are going to confession and tomorrow is going to be communion. This possibly is getting ready for a long journey. There are unofficial rumours that we may be setting off on the 4.2.43

2.2.43 - Tuesday - Today is St. Mary's day - Morning communion. In afternoon a lot of our fellows are going to Qizil-Rabat where there is going to be a football match between the airmen and the 2nd tank brigade. The result 2-2 although the tankmen played better.

3.2.43 - Official readiness for the journey. In afternoon we have a farewell parade and a farewell speech from our commanding officer.

4.2.43 - Thursday - We are packed and ready to go. In the afternoon General Anders reviewed the embarking troops. He also made a speech. Just before the parade I saw my cousin Gerard. It was an emotional meeting. The last time I saw him it was in Odessa. From him I found out that his brother Alfons managed successfully to return to Krakow. After the parade we were loaded on the lorries and eventually taken to the railway. We are going to Baghdad.

5.2.43 - Friday - We are in Baghdad. The local people are very fascinated and wanted to know who we were. We disembarked from the train and marched through the town to the southern railway station. We are marching in closed ranks. The town is beautiful. There is a lot of Mosques and Minarets and the houses are built in the eastern style. We are crossing on the bridge across Tigris. It is magnificent scenery. Some of the building foundations are going right into the water. In the distance, on a boulevard, we could see palms growing. On the river itself there is a tremendous variety of different types of boats. Further along we are passing something which looks like a triumphal arch. It must be something from bygone days. We reach the railway station. We are loaded on the train and we are travelling further. Outside town we see what seems like palm gardens and some stations we were only stopping momentarily.

6.2.43 - Saturday - We travelled almost all night making very few stops. At 1 p.m. we reached Basra. Straight away we were transferred to a boat.

7.2.43 - Sunday - Morning we are leaving port and we are sailing in the estuary of Euphrates and Tigris. On the shore as far as we could see are continuous gardens of palms and in between them beautiful villas and occasionally clay and bamboo houses . I am assuming the poorer people live in them. Every so often we are passing larger and smaller landing stages. We passed few American ships standing at anchor. In the afternoon we are stopping and we are on anchor waiting till nightfall. At night we started sailing again.

8.2.43 - Monday - Now we are in the Persian Gulf. (Total silence) Around us only sea and a lot of seagulls overhead. In front of us just on the horizon we can see a silhouette of some large ship. In the evening we can see a lot of phosphorescent things in the sea which fascinated us.

9.2.43 - Tuesday - We are sailing along the coastline. Every so often we are passing small sailing craft. On the horizon there is a rocky sea shore. We assume this is Persian coastline.

10.2.43 - Wednesday - We are sailing very close to the land and we see the very rocky coastline. In the sun it looks beautiful. On the left side is the mainland. On the right side we are passing islands of various sizes. We are sailing now through the Straits of Ormuz. Today we should reach the Arabian Sea. 2 p.m. we are stopping in the Port Bandar Abbas. We are invaded by local people trying to sell us their wares, mainly fruit. The English trying to get rid of them by hosing them with water. With us there are also Hindu soldiers. They are trying hard to learn some Polish words. They are not very fond of British because they are being ill-treated and they are surprised that us whites are treating them as equals which they don't often meet.

11.2.43 - We are leaving port. With us there are another 30 ships. We are all sailing in convoy. We are escorted by two torpedo boats. With us we are surrounded by various ships and boats. Some of them are passenger ships, but mainly tankers and cargo ships. We are still sailing along the Persian coast. Every so often we are passing small islands. On one larger one we saw something which looked like a large town. By evening we are going away from the coastline. We must now be in Arabian Sea. Some of us are experiencing sea sickness. I feel a bit light headed, but apart from that I feel all right. The name of our boat is Islam and its home port is Bombay.

12.2.43 - Friday - We are now miles away from the coast and we are issued with new tropical uniforms with the cork helmets. The sun is getting hotter and hotter.

13.2.43 - Saturday - The sea is getting a bit rough and everybody is suffering again. In the late afternoon the fog came in. We can only see the nearest ships sailing by us. They are tankers and the sea is flowing over the decks. Every minute the fog is getting thicker. In the end we see nothing. The sea is getting mad. All of us in turn are vomiting.

14.2.43 - Sunday Today the weather is beautiful. The sun is getting really hot. The sea is very calm.

15.2.43 - Monday - We are getting a bit bored. There is nothing to do. On the deck it is rather difficult to sit as it is too hot for comfort. Some of even starting with headaches. In the afternoon we are practising to sing the air force march.

17.2.43 - Wednesday - In the morning we started packing our belongings. Obviously we must be getting near Bombay. Lunch time 1.45. On the horizon we can see the mountains after that we can see the city and the port. In the sea round us we see more and more ships and boats and sailing boats. Now I can see quite distinctly Buoys with lights on top. In the background the towers of the mosques and the city. On the left side is city and the port. On the right side we see small islands and rather rocky coast of the mainland. It looks quite wild. There are some rocks which separate the port from the bay which seems to be going very far inland. In that bay we can see many ships and boats. On the entry into the bay there is a lighthouse and further along forest of palm and beyond that a very tall tower which seems to be a water tower. And further along there is a large building possibly a church or a monastery built in the Gothic style which clashes with the rest. Beyond the city, very modern buildings and also beautiful eastern style mosques. Our ship now is being towed by the tug and we pull into the basin. And there! in front of us there is our polish ship Kosciuszko. We are hoping to get orders for disembarking but we are forbidden to go on land. But because our toilets on the ship have been locked up they have to let us land to find toilets. The officers have taken our paybooks and marched us in convoy to public lavatories. This only applies to the Poles. The English and Hindus are doing what they like.

18.2.43.- Thursday - In the morning in great confusion we eventually disembark and are marched into nearby railway station and on to the waiting train. Soon after this we are on our way. The train goes through the centre of the city. There are some nice and very beautiful modern buildings. In the streets there is great activity. Then we are passing by some rather nice villas, then some industrial part and then it seems like rather poor working quarters. Here we can see the poverty and dirt. Now we are

going through a mountain district. We are passing through palm forests and also some rocky district. Some of the scenery reminds me of the american films. The train is electric. We pass through some 10 tunnels. We have travelled for some 6 hours and we have reached our destination. The place is called Deolali. We are marching through some avenues of palms. Reaching the camp we find hundreds and hundreds of nicely built barracks. This is a place of rest. The services done for us are done mainly by black or brown people. They clean and sweep our quarters, clean and polish our boots and even wash our utensils after a meal. They wash our laundry but very often demand baksheesh.

19.2.43 - Friday - Today we have a free day. I went to a small local town. There is nothing interesting there but in the shops you can see some beautiful fabrics.

20.2.43 - Saturday - In the afternoon our team played against the English sailors. Result 1-1.

21.2.43 - Sunday - In the afternoon I have taken a few photographs including garrison chapel.

23.2.43 - Tuesday - At night we had a forced march of 20 km. Some of our soldiers were so upset about it and forgot about the officer who organised it was our commanding officer.

25.2.43 - Thursday - Right from the early morning we are in readiness to march. In afternoon we pack our belongings and are taken by lorries to the railway.

26.2.43 - Friday - Reveille 3.0 a.m. breakfast and march to the railway station. 6.30 a.m. we are on the way. We are leaving this rather pleasant place. We reach Bombay approximately 12 noon.

3 p.m. we are embarking on a passenger ship which is manned by American navy. 6 p.m. we are leaving port. The passengers are mainly British and Americans.

28.2.43 - Sunday - Our ship must have been one of the very large luxury liners. Inside we can see the remains of the ballrooms, dining rooms and the library. But today is destined to transport military personnel. All the paintings and mirrors are covered with plywood. On the decks below they are fitted multi-tier hammocks. There are a tremendous amount of passengers on board and sometimes it is difficult to move about. The dining room is extremely hot - almost like a Turkish bath. At night rather than sleeping in hammocks where it is extremely hot, we go and sleep on the deck. Our ship has a tremendous armaments and it must be very fast and that's why we are sailing alone. The name of the ship is Mari Posa.

1.3.43 - Monday - Late afternoon, round about six o'clock we cross the international date line.

3.3.43 - Wednesday - In the afternoon we have seen rather a lot of flying fish. They almost look like dragon flies but of course very large. Most of their colour is sea green.

6.3.43 - Saturday - Today is a lot cooler so we can eat in the dining room without distress and sleep in our hammocks. The sea is rather rough. The wind is rising. Consequently the waves are increasing.

7.3.43 - Sunday - From the rumours we gather there are a lot of Italian P.O.W's and among them a few generals. Weather not too good. On the deck we have a church service carried out by an English priest.

11.3.43 - Thursday - On the horizon we can see some mountains.

1.6.43 - Tuesday - We leave Northolt and going to our new station up north place is called Hutton Cranswick. Place is rather nice.