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MY WAR

BY

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(née MOTOSZKO)

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FOR MY CHILDREN AND THEIR CHILDREN

Manchester 1984





FOR MY CH

THE AUTHOR

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BIALYSTOK, MAY 1940

The Arrest.

On Monday 27th in my hometown Bialystok it was a beautiful hot sunny day. After a quick breakfast, my shoes in my hand and a small handkerchief in the puffed sleeve of my blue summer dress, I ran barefooted to a neighbouring market-garden-cum-nursery where I had been given temporary work in the hot house. It was nine months since the war had begun and the Russians had taken over this Eastern part of Poland, leaving the Western part to the Germans. I had to interrupt my studies in the southern town of Lwow and return home as I was unable to find a job in my intended profession, Pharmacy, and I gratefully accepted any job that was going.

Most of the professional people had already been arrested or sent into "voluntary" exile to Kazakhstan or Siberia. The retreating Polish Army, trapped in the Eastern territories were now in Prisoner of War camps deep in Russia.

On Polish soil everything was in turmoil; families trying to escape Hitler's army found themselves in unknown places, trying to cross the new border dividing Poland, as a result of the invasion of two enemy forces. Most of them were caught by the Russian Border Patrol and sent directly into prisons, children taken from parents, husbands and wives separated, but their direction was always the same - East.

On this lovely morning nothing indicated that a similar fate was looming ahead for me. About 10.00 o'clock two gentlemen visitors came through the gate and asked for the manager of the gardens. After a brief chat with him for some reason unknown to me, I was given a huge bunch of freshly opened lilacs and told to go with these men to the Head Offices of the City Parks & Plantations which employed me. Happily in my innocence, with not a word to my mother or aunt (my father was in hiding) because as a former headmaster he had been on the "wanted" list since the war started, I walked alongside my companions. One I knew to be the former manager of the City Parks Department, the other must have been, or so I thought, the new manager who had been sent by the Russians to replace him.

Instead of taking me by the usual route to the Offices in the huge park near Zwierzyniec, we turned left towards some new modern buildings, one of which was the Headquarters of the dreaded NKWD, later the KGB. The man unknown to me was Russian, he grabbed my arm and turned with me into the entrance of the

building, at the same time snatching the lilacs from me and thrusting them into the arms of the astonished sentry. Mr. Graal, the man I knew, was left behind on the pavement making strange signs and saying something I could not understand like "I'll let your family know". I was rushed up the stairs into the small office, the key turned in the door and my captor did not waste much time on explanations. Pointing to the window and vaguely in the direction of our home, he said in broken Polish "You will never see your home again".

The horrible truth slowly dawned on me - I must have been arrested. So this is it. Still not believing that this meant serious trouble, I listened as he bombarded me with strange questions. What did he want to know, my life story or my views on the political situation or perhaps my broken romance!? He did not speak Polish and I did not understand Russian so after a couple of fruitless hours he and two others took me in an elegant limousine to the town's prison.

PRISON - BIALYSTOK AND JOURNEY TO MINSK

The Russian woman warden greeted me with "Oh, another of these girl revolutionaries?". She snatched my watch from my wrist, ring from my finger, even the hair grips were taken out of my hair. I was fingerprinted and photographed with a number round my neck. Finally I was taken to a big airy room, full of women of various ages sitting on the floor and the wooden platform running along one side of the room. Everyone watched my entrance with great curiosity and in silence. I was too shocked to talk to them and just stood there. They had noticed my suntan, the white marks where my wrist-watch had been, the white band on my finger, a reminder of my beautiful ring and suddenly everybody was asking questions. "What was I here for, why had I no other clothes or luggage with me, was it nice and warm outside as I had no stockings on my legs, etc." In turn I learned that most of these women were caught at the new border trying to cross to Warsaw or from the West hoping to join their families here in the Eastern half of the divided Poland.

Here we all were, unable to communicate with our families, forbidden any letters, parcels and visits. One kind soul lent me a cardigan another a piece of towel. No mattresses were provided and we had to sleep on the bare floor. The austerity was not the hardest thing to accept; the possibility of any communication with our families was out of the question under Soviet law. That was unbearable!!

I was unable to which was eagerly taken by experience that I knew by experience that for a long time so that I could. I knew what that was. I learned later that some more clothing to be provided. The answer at the gate was "nie nuzno, vsio choro" (is provided).

After five days (come with your belongings) the big cell was opened and I took with me! I returned had lent it to me and a prison van which was where I was led to a compartment with a bed, the ceiling, a small window, patrolling along the walls. I was given a blanket. That was it. I was in the cell of Poland to the detriment of my family and my life. I took over and I fell into regular intervals to fall into oblivion.

After three days we reached the capital of Bialystok. June 2nd, sunny, warm, showing through the clouds. Minsk Station to the centre of this famous cobbled square. There were rows of small buildings at me. As always, called by my father's name (a guard took me and the walls were covered with mementos of the many. After adding my name to the pin (no such objects were terrified of being in a populated cell.

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I was unable to eat even my meagre ration of daily bread, which was eagerly taken and shared by my companions. They knew by experience that the newly arrested could not face food for a long time so they enjoyed the extra mouthfuls whilst they could. I knew what terrible anxiety my family must be suffering. I learned later that they had brought and tried to pass some more clothing to me knowing what I was wearing when arrested. The answer at the gates was always the same "Niet, Nitchevo nie nuzno, vsio chorosho". (No, nothing is needed, everything is provided).

After five days the now familiar "sobierajsia z wieszczkami" (come with your belongings) was shouted at me and the door of the big cell was opened. I had no "wieszczek" (no things) to take with me! I returned the cardigan to the kind lady who had lent it to me and I was quickly led to the waiting black prison van which was driven at speed to the railway station where I was led to a special prison wagon. There was a small compartment with a barred door and at the other end, just under the ceiling, a small barred window. NKVD armed guards were patrolling along the corridor. The night was cold and I was given a blanket. The train started moving to the East. That was it. I was in the depths of despair, I was being taken out of Poland to the dreaded Russia, I was leaving my country, my family and my life. Blissfully, my body's defence mechanism took over and I fell into three days of sleep. They woke me at regular intervals to give me some bread and tea and again I fell into oblivion.

After three days we finally arrived at the town of Minsk, the capital of Bialorussia (White Russia). It was still only June 2nd, sunny, warm and fragrant of which small glimpses were showing through the cracks of the prison van now taking us from Minsk Station to the prison - a great, medieval fortress. In the centre of this formidable building I was unloaded into a cobbled square. There I stood looking to four sides of row after row of small barred windows, which silently looked back at me. As always, checking and re-checking my name, surname, my father's name (a very important part of identification), the guard took me and locked me in a small empty room. All the walls were covered with scratched names, addresses, dates etc. mementos of the many, many people who had passed this way. After adding my name and date, scratched with a smuggled safety pin (no such objects were permitted), I sat on the floor, terrified of being left alone and praying to be taken to a more populated cell.

Here the black thought filled me again, tormenting my young

conscience. I was the cause of all the anguish my family must be going through because of my arrest. Our family was such a close-knit unit, protecting me and my sister Dana from all the unpleasant things in life in the outside world. I could not accept this brutal shattering blow to our own peaceful world at home.

MY FAMILY HISTORY

My father was a Headmaster of a big school for boys, the best in town. For many years he had been a Councillor on the local Council, a well-known and respected citizen looking after the Education Department. My mother had died when I was only nine years old and my father remarried three years later. My maternal grandmother, born Sklodowska was ninety when the war started and quite senile. Long before that when still mentally alert but chair-bound after a bad fracture of the hip, she was a holy terror to her maids and her daughters but very kind to her little orphans, as she called Dana and I. Always ready to tell stories of her younger days when as a young teenager she was delegated to read and amuse her younger cousin Mania - the future Madame Curie-Sklodowska. She told us how Mania, her sisters Bronia, Hela and brother Josef were also orphaned when their mother died of Tuberculosis for which there was no cure other than trips to Switzerland. Not everybody could afford that.

The family estate "Sklody", somehow disappeared and my grandmother married Konstanty Szredzinski (my grandfather). He also came from a family of very long ancestry. He was deprived of his land by the Russians in 1863 for a very serious crime, he fought against the oppressors in the famous uprising. Not only was his estate confiscated but he himself was sent into Siberian exile for five years. During those years his first wife died, leaving two children. Then he married again, Miss Boleslawa Sklodowska (my grandmother). Her four daughters were Wanda, Maria, Helena (my mother) and Apolonia, all but one died before her.

First to go was my mother who died in 1928. Her remaining sisters, our beloved aunts were very loving and protective towards us. Even Zosia, Aunt Wanda's daughter relented and allowed us to play with her dolls, a strictly forbidden pleasure before. As she was fifteen we respected her wishes without question.

After our father remarried we acquired an extensive new family of uncles, aunts and cousins. They were very

kind to us and accepted our large family. They were helpful in many ways. They still keep in touch with us during the fierce battles. At twenty-one he was conscripted into the army. Zonka still lives in Poland (my mother's side), we

Sitting on the bank during the summer of the year we spent at our Aunt's farm in the USSR province "Wolyn" these sleeping villages, the fields full of ripe grain, rape, blue with flax, tingling with sky lanterns. For many years together with Witek we used to go like Zbaraz, Wisniowski long gone romantic past author Henryk Sienkiewicz.

Tired after cycling in the river Horyn on the age of twelve I found much wider than my own brought back in the end needles of hopeless pain was not left in that.

Soon the guard came checking of my name and took me along an endless doors, each with a light another escorted prisoner face the wall". Some possibly to avoid any believe that behind the masses of people squashed floor. We stopped at cell was roughly 6'x1 on the opposite wall.

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kind to us and accepted us straight away as part of their own large family. They were very loyal and very helpful to each other in many ways. We became close to our new cousins and still keep in touch to this day. Sadly, Witek was killed during the fierce battle of Lenino against Hitler's army, at twenty-one he was just the right age for our occupants to conscript him into their army. His brother Leszek and sister Zonka still live in Poland, so does my elder cousin Zosia (on my mother's side), well in her seventies now.

LIFE IN MINSK PRISON

Sitting on the floor of that empty cell I was thinking of the summer of the year before. Almost every summer holiday we spent at our Aunt's farm on the south-east border with USSR province "Wolyn". It is hard to describe the charm of these sleeping villages dotted amongst the gentle hills. Fields full of ripening wheat and oats, yellow with flowering rape, blue with flax and pink with clover; the hot summer sun tingling with sky larks songs had a magical quality unforgettable for many years to come. There, with our cousins Leszek and Witek we used to cycle to neighbouring historical places like Zbaraz, Wisniowiec, Krzemieniec looking for signs of the long gone romantic past so beautifully described by our classic author Henryk Sienkiewicz.

Tired after cycling in the hot sun we would go for a swim in the river Horyn or on occasions in the Borsuki Lake. At the age of twelve I learned to swim in that River Horyn not much wider than my own small garden, but these memories, brought back in the empty dirty little cell were like sharp needles of hopeless pain. Life to be forgotten forever. I was not left in that empty cell for long!

Soon the guard opened the door and after the customary checking of my name and "otchestwo" (my father's first name) took me along an endless empty corridor with lots of closed doors, each with a little "Judas" window. Now and then we met another escorted prisoner who had to obey orders to "turn and face the wall". Sometimes it was me who had to face the wall, possibly to avoid any chance of recognition. One would not believe that behind those heavy final looking doors, were masses of people squashed like sardines on the bare cement floor. We stopped at No.39 cell and I was pushed inside. The cell was roughly 6'x18' with a small glassless window high up on the opposite wall. Sitting on the floor against both long

walls were half dressed women of various ages, all twenty-two of them. The heat was suffocating. These women, clad only in bras and briefs were fanning themselves constantly with wet towels in order to create a draught.

Every eye was upon me, not very welcoming, another body added to an already overcrowded room! I also read a lot of compassion in their silent stares. As there was no room for me I stood against the now closed door and tried to breathe some fresh air coming through the cracks of the wooden planks. It did not help me much. Black spots started dancing in front of my eyes - at this moment the guard opened the door with our supper - I fell right at his feet in a deep faint. He was shaken enough not only by this but even more so by the loud shrieks of protests by all the others in the cell, complaining bitterly of the inhuman conditions. They cried that not only was there not enough room for everybody to lie down on the floor at night but even such a free commodity as fresh air was rationed. In fact the small windows gave so little air that above the door was a ventilator shaft into which fresh air was pumped for a few hours a day and again at night, for the rest of the time we dared not breathe too deeply in order to save oxygen. We tried to sit tightly by the walls to allow free passage to the door to the bucket, covered by a piece of cardboard (after all we had to use it once or twice a day) and it was right under the Judas window, the only place the guards could not see.

My spectacular introduction to the Minsk prison had some effect. Next day we were moved to cell No.40, twice as big. This comfort did not last long. Because this cell was bigger they soon started pushing in more and more people and in no time we were just as squashed and half-suffocated as before. The only respite was the daily trip to the big communal toilets which possessed a luxury .. three cold water taps on the wall and one wash basin.

Firstly, after washing the unbelievably dirty floor, we stripped and took turns to have a quick wash under those life-saving taps, wash our clothes and returned refreshed to the cell. The cell in our absence had had a quick search by the guards in case some forbidden objects were hidden like a needle, pen, scissors, mirror, gun(?), etc.

Once a week we were taken to the big shower room. Each was given a piece of coarse soap. It was very difficult to wash one's hair with this primitive kind of soap but at least we felt cleaner. Wet pieces of towelling and other garments were for swinging in the hot air of the cell, drying and at

the same time creating
Most evenings there was exercise in the high put on our dresses and the weather was fine for me as I had no work.

By now we had grown were two school girls Pinsk. The other side Wilno. She had been experienced in the life to separate me from F bully. Roma was evidently decided that I would have my own opinion was that Lala

Then there was a girl coming constantly on her bread ration. She wanted to change her bullying way from this "Dante's Iron middle aged lady, a friend of School from Wolkowysk to adapt to these hard Clara" who had frequented at the guards. She was with her prediction of

The youngest was from Lida. In between often recalled how he from the humble potato it needed a great deal unvaried diet of potatoes different ways.

The food in prison of bread and coffee explained to the guards and this resulted in always the same, "And macaroni?" or, "nitch you'll get used to it evidently the pinnacle talked about food, except paper was permitted - course. We promised

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Most evenings there was another event - half an hour of exercise in the high walled prison yard. For that we had to put on our dresses and shoes and walk in circles. As long as the weather was fine all was well. Later was uncomfortable for me as I had no warm clothing.

By now we had got to know each other better. On my left were two school girls, 17 year old Mietka and Wandzia from Pinsk. The other side was occupied by Lala, a young bride from Wilno. She had been here longer than me and was more experienced in the life of this particular cell. She wanted to separate me from Roma, an 18 year old country girl and a bully. Roma was envious of anybody from the town. Lala decided that I would stand no chance with her and the general opinion was that Lala was right.

Then there was a nun, a very sweet and saintly lady praying constantly on her rosary beads made of crumbs from her bread ration. She was praying in the hope that Roma would change her bullying ways and of course, for our speedy release from this "Dante's Inferno". Further along this side was a middle aged lady, a former Headmistress of a Girl's Grammar School from Wolkowysk. No longer young she found it very hard to adapt to these harsh conditions. Next to her was "Crazy Clara" who had frequent outbursts of crying, swearing and shouting at the guards. She terrified everybody, guards included, with her prediction for the near future (very bad indeed).

The youngest was 16 year old Sarenka, the only Jewish girl, from Lida. In between crying for her mother and father she often recalled how her grandmother could make fantastic food from the humble potato. Their large family was very poor and it needed a great deal of imagination to survive on the unvaried diet of potatoes and onions served in almost a hundred different ways.

The food in prison was very poor too, a monotonous diet of bread and coffee and a matchbox of sugar. We often complained to the guards because we lacked vitamins of any kind and this resulted in various skin complaints. Their reply was always the same, "And what would you like, perhaps steak with macoroni?" or, "nitchevo, Pryvykniosh" meaning, "All right, you'll get used to it". Steak with macoroni was to them evidently the pinnacle of luxury. Between ourselves we often talked about food, exchanged recipes, learning by heart as no paper was permitted - for future use. Future was very soon of course. We promised to invite all from the cell for the feast.

Month followed month and we were still waiting. Not having any communication with the outside world nobody knew what was happening, which way the war was turning. Tapping on the very thick walls we managed to talk to the Polish men next door. I somehow remembered the Morse code, unused since my Girl Guide days, and on the other side somebody would interpret it but they knew nothing as no recently arrested prisoner had joined their cell.

On our other side there were Russian men. Their Morse was more complicated as there were more letters in their alphabet, also as I could not read in Russian it had to be translated into Polish by some women in our small community, however, before I learned this they were removed and the cell was filled with young Russian offenders, mostly pick-pockets and hooligans and we had nothing in common with them, to talk in Morse, or otherwise. As a rule the criminal element was kept well separated from political offenders but the current overcrowding with hundreds and thousands of "guilty" Polish prisoners made this separation impossible. We were learning fast on all sides.

"Crazy Clara" often frightened us with her occasional outbursts of shouting, swearing and crying. To amuse ourselves and to take our minds off depressing reality, we took to dance and drama. Many of us still remembered various poems, books and plays and each night someone suggested a theme. A programme was quickly selected "artists" chosen and the problem of costumes, with everybody's help, solved. In one corner the performers were getting ready, the rest sat as close to the walls as possible, leaving the middle clear as a stage. The magic moment arrived when Mietka, the school girl from Pinsk opened the show with her dance. No Isadora Duncan had greater admirers than Mietka. Even normally sulky peasant women in the corner or bully Roma or "Crazy Clara" dared whisper anything other than words of absolute enchantment. Next, some couples walked round and round in a majestic Polonaise, sung softly by the audience.

The costumes magically constructed from bits and pieces gladly offered by all, added colour and scenery. Then Wandzia the other school girl did a few recitations from "Pan Tadeusz", a classic epic by our own and famous poet of the 19th Century, loved and admired by all Polish people. Outside the cell doors the guards were pushing each other from the Judas window to see what the crazy Polish girls would do next.

They still thought of us as a "Pany", the oppressive class of landlords which had to be punished at all costs.

This was their or to be invade Poland in 1939. is a title, like Mister of addressing any male, or acquaintance. "You" a colleague.

Every day when given tried to talk and ask us was simply beyond them the cell was a landowner only sin was that she had Russian decree. She was prison. Her husband, arrested and she lost so that two of the others was a headmistress, two students the remainder just house They were young men "box emergency and doing their never cruel but very puzzling

The Interrogators a kettle of fish altogether the interrogation to estimate etc. It was mostly at night the voice called "Who is followed but only one was first name, what is your journey in the black box chance to breath fresh air of a town street, children Unbelievably there was no

After several of them everything on principle, colleague from my school lodgings in Lwow. She was Resistance Movement but not know of her political only friendly soul in a the obvious person to of they believed me or not established. Several were called "with your things prison. There on the corner to us our sentence.

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This was their or to be precise, their Government's excuse to
invade Poland in 1939. Nobody explained to them that "Pan"
is a title, like Mister in English and that is the correct way
of addressing any male, or "Pani" to any female, who is a stranger
or acquaintance. "You" or "Ty" was reserved for a friend or
a colleague.

Every day when giving us our daily bread ration they
tried to talk and ask us many questions about our lives. It
was simply beyond them to believe that only one of forty in
the cell was a landowner. She was an old lady of 65 and her
only sin was that she had more land than was permitted by
Russian decree. She was classified as a "Kulak" and put in
prison. Her husband, a grown daughter and son were also
arrested and she lost contact with them, naturally. The fact
that two of the others were nurses, two were school girls, one
a headmistress, two students, five landworkers and one a doctor,
the remainder just housewives, they simply failed to understand.
They were young men "borrowed" from the army for this special
emergency and doing their duty. They were reasonably polite,
never cruel but very puzzled indeed.

The Interrogators or "Sledovatiely" were a different
kettle of fish altogether. Everyone of us had to go through
the interrogation to establish the grade of crime, connections,
etc. It was mostly at night when the door opened noisily and
the voice called "Who is here on letter M"? Several answers
followed but only one was right. "You Motoszko, what is your
first name, what is your father's name? Come with us". The
journey in the black box never lasted long but it gave us
chance to breath fresh air. You could hear the normal sounds
of a town street, children's shouts, other cars overtaking us.
Unbelievably there was normal life outside.

After several of these interrogations, where I denied
everything on principle, they finally brought a girl, my former
colleague from my school who had stayed for the night in my
lodgings in Lwow. She was in her capacity a courier in the
Resistance Movement but I stood my ground firmly saying I did
not know of her political involvement. I told them I was the
only friendly soul in a strange town so for this reason I was
the obvious person to offer her a bed for the night. Whether
they believed me or not was immaterial, the truth was
established. Several weeks later I and seven others were
called "with your things" and sent to a different part of the
prison. There on the corridor an official came out and read
to us our sentence.

SENTENCE AND TRAVEL TO ASIA

In Russia no jury is necessary. I was sentenced to 8 years in a Labour Camp, or Ispravitielney Lagera. We were led to a cell in a different wing where they kept prisoners who had been sentenced and were awaiting transport. So we spent the whole month of January 1941 in a big damp cell where condensation was constantly dripping down the walls, forming puddles on the floor. We were given slatted platforms, often used in the baths and some mattresses filled with wood shavings to keep us dry. Nevertheless, all of us caught colds, aches and pains in the joints, often with high temperatures. It was now very cold in the cell and I received an addition to my summer dress. Some kindly cell mate gave me a black woollen dress and a pair of silk stockings, another presented me with her spare underslip; yet another grabbed the only one thin single blanket in the cell (prison property) to protect me from the 30 degrees centigrade of frost outside. These girls were magnificent, ready to share their proverbial "last penny" with a more needy person. I do hope that life was kind to them as it changed for me, almost a year later.

After 4 weeks we were again called out, a slightly different group this time and led to the courtyard to join a very big assembly. Many prison vans were waiting, obviously our transport was ready. As we were waiting in neat lines one of the guards came to me recognising as government property the blanket over my shoulders. It was the end of January, the frost was severe and seeing that I only had a dress, silk stockings and court shoes, totally inadequate gear for the Russian winter, he took pity on my shivering frame and brought me a heavy great long sheepskin coat, with hood, the kind often used by the sentries in the watch towers or by the horse-driven sleighs. Sleighs, called "dorozki" were very much in use for passenger transport in this backward Bialorussian town, motor taxis were hardly known.

I was very grateful for this man's gesture and the priceless item of clothing which literally saved my life and of several of my friends. It lasted for two Russian winters and served us all well.

Soon after the inevitable checking and endless counting and re-counting we were loaded again into the black prison vans then driven to the familiar prison coaches. They consisted of a long corridor with continuous barred partitions with small compartments for 8 people. Each compartment had

eight hard benches which night. The hard surface to it. The constant pa every movement was less stopped - we were in Mo

Loud shouts of "Ev the train. Then there surprised everyone - si on the platform? The s rifles pushing down the counting, we were reloa to take us to another s A similar train was wai

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Somebody lifted me stockings and started r my skin was rubbed off terrible pain. For the swollen and full of bli sick bay was vaseline.

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eight hard benches which served as platforms for sleeping at night. The hard surface did not trouble us as we were used to it. The constant patrol by the guards checking on our every movement was less welcome! After two days the train stopped - we were in Moscow.

Loud shouts of "Everybody out" and we were hurried off the train. Then there was another command "Sit down" which surprised everyone - sit where, surely not on the dirty snow on the platform? The shouts were repeated, this time with rifles pushing down the slower ones. After counting and re-counting, we were reloaded once more into the waiting lorries to take us to another station on the other side of Moscow. A similar train was waiting for us.

The journey lasted two weeks travelling across snowy country, crossing numerous rivers to the Ural range of mountains. After a short stop at Swierdlowsk we had reached the end of our journey. There was a compulsory stop in a snowed up empty landscape; the train could not negotiate the huge snow drifts, there was no food, no water, no heat for two days until the rescue train managed to force its way to us - a very unimportant cargo.

The next evening a new order was shouted along the train, "disembark". It was pitch dark, a blizzard was raging, nobody knew where to go. After jumping into the deep snow we tried to follow the voices. Nothing was visible. My heavy sheepskin kept me warm but I did not notice that both my shoes were missing. After groping in the snow around me I found both of them and carried them in my hands for safety, my feet were numb anyway. A while later some lighted windows appeared, the barracks of a transit camp came out of the blackness. Inside old hands were waiting to give help.

Somebody lifted me on to the table, took off my frozen stockings and started rubbing my legs with snow. Soon half of my skin was rubbed off and feeling returned slowly, with terrible pain. For the next two months my legs were badly swollen and full of blisters, the only treatment offered in the sick bay was vaseline.

February came, it was still very cold but very sunny. Our barracks had no floorboards and were terribly muddy. On both sides were two-tier bunk-platforms for sleeping, one never knew who you were sleeping next to. On my right was a girl who had a habit of pushing needles into her arms, she was trying to commit suicide. As soon as the needles were removed in the camp ambulatorium she managed to find another and do the same exercise again. I was terrified that one day

or night she might do the same to me - as I had no such plans for my future I moved away from her nearer to my companions from Minsk.

AKMOLINSK CAMP For Women Political Prisoners

The time came to leave this temporary camp named Karabas to a more permanent place, to work out our sentences and to be re-educated to a correct and only way of Russian Communism. Our time came and name after name was read out, most of my companions from Minsk were included in our group. A big tractor with a platform with benches stood waiting on the trackless snow outside the camp gates. A large group of about 60 was called and loaded and a slow drive started in the early morning. Just before nightfall we arrived at Akmolinsk, some 40km east. It was a very cold drive. As soon as we could not feel our feet we jumped off the slow moving platform and ran behind until the circulation returned to our half-frozen limbs. My big funny sheepskin kept the rest of me warm.

At the huge new camp we were allocated to the dormitory barracks. There were double storied 4-people bunks with straw filled mattresses waiting for us. There were many barracks of various sizes, some huge, some much smaller and as we learned later, serving different purposes. Many were for sleeping, very many for work. There was a canteen, a kitchen, a hospital, a sewing factory, a bakery and many more. To the Soviet Government this camp was a show-piece to anybody who came to admire their unique marvellous system. This camp arose from the bare steppe, built by women, not just any women, by "The Wives". There is a law in this paradise (Red Russia), that if a husband is arrested for a political offence, his wife is automatically given some percentage of his sentence. Somehow it is always 3, 5 or 8 years. I do not know what happens to the wife if the husband is shot, perhaps they just wound her. The children as a rule go to the state orphanages - Big Brother cares for everybody.

I was lucky indeed to come to this camp in preference to others - all the women, nearly 2000 of them were highly professional. We had many doctors (200 originally), writers, teachers, translators, artists. All shared the same mortal sin, their husbands were arrested by Stalin in the famous 1937 Trotski purge. Gradually those whose skills were needed

like doctors, designed smaller camps.

The day after our clothing, padded jacket oversized boots. In fact it was water - a On three sides of the thick reeds. These w snow was very deep an day. Freshly arrived starved none of us cc 12 hours digging in t to do all of the 4 sh 4 o'clock in the morn guard, the dogs and t then off to the cante "kasza" (porridge) pl

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The day after our arrival we were issued with some warm
clothing, padded jackets, padded trousers, some underwear and
oversized boots. Early in the morning after hot "tea" - in
fact it was water - and a piece of bread we were sent to work.
On three sides of the camp was a frozen lake covered with
thick reeds. These were supposed to be cut with sickles. The
snow was very deep and the prescribed norm was 40 sheaves a
day. Freshly arrived from a long stay in the prison and half
starved none of us could possibly work the full norm. After
12 hours digging in the snow and cutting the reeds I managed
to do all of the 4 sheaves. We had left the camp "Zone" at
4 o'clock in the morning and we returned, together with the
guard, the dogs and the rifles at 4 o'clock in the afternoon,
then off to the canteen for a meal which consisted of some
"kasza" (porridge) plus their special version of tea.

Our efforts provided the camp with its only source of
fuel for heating, cooking and drying damp clothing after the
day's work. The full norm entitled us to the full ration of
bread, unfortunately, we managed only one-tenth of it, so the
piece of bread for the next day was very small indeed. Their
slogan "The one who does not work does not eat" was a very
real one!

The blizzards were still severe and from barrack to
barrack and to the toilets there was a long rope stretched to
hang on to for safety. My first day at work did me no good.
I came down with Pneumonia and was taken to the small camp
hospital. The life here was on quite a different level.
Seven women doctors, four nurses and a cleaning woman looked
after 20 or so patients. The primitive resources did very
little to treat sick patients but the good care taken by the
doctors and nurses counted for a lot. The staff also often
dropped in for a chat asking us Polish girls about life in the
West, of which they knew nothing. They admired our hairstyles
and above all our frilly underwear. One Russian patient in
my ward was a translator from Russian to French and English.
Another was a trapeze artist in a circus and she indeed had
seen pretty underclothes, so we must have been telling the
truth but when I mentioned that the year before my cousin
Zosia and her doctor husband had holidayed in Yugoslavia,
taking their car for the whole summer, my temperature was
taken again late evening to make sure I was not too ill. My
Auntie who was a teacher had also taken part in a trip to Italy
with a group of other teachers, was too much for everybody, -

I'd decidedly had a relapse. Soon though I was well enough to return to work.

The end of March came, cold but sunny. The temperature outside was rising and a new project was in store for us called "Sniegozadirzannie". Delaying the thaw. Next morning almost everybody was sent far into the steppe along snowed up railway lines, miles into the horizon. Unfortunately no-one told us why the "old hands" wore funny Eskimo style home-made sun glasses. All day we shovelled high snow ridges parallel to each other. The purpose of this was to delay the melting of the snow for an extended period in the Spring, thus assisting irrigation in the dry area. All these huge steppes were cultivated for cereals. At the end of the day we could hardly walk back over the deep snow, not only walking was impossible but most of us suffered terrible inflammation of the eyes, the snow blindness. No help this time (from a very unfriendly doctor) and no bread either. My temperature shot up again, my face was covered with snow blisters. Here a kind friend found me and took me back to the hospital. The doctors and nurses hardly recognised me, shouts of horror greeted me "What have those devils done to you in three short days? We let you out looking quite human and now this"! I did not know what was the matter with me this time but it took another month to bring me back to reasonable health.

When I was finally discharged May was in, Spring, sunny and golden. The grass was green and the formerly frozen lake azure blue and fresh reeds were growing. I was classified for "internal occupation" in future.

The next assignment took me to the great factory of winter garment making. There were two models of these. One was called a Fufajka, an early version of the present day anorak. It was made from very poor black cotton. Nylon was unknown in those days. The padding was of crude cotton wool. The other model was more elegantly cut, a double-breasted thickish jacket with pockets, collar and buttons. My job was to press flat various seams at different stages of work. All items were numbered, each one carefully noted, as everything had to be counted for the final total. That in turn decided how much bread you received at the end of the day. Girls on either side were pushing me with my part of the work as they themselves were in a great hurry to achieve as much food as possible, so for the first time my norm was over 100% and what is more I had just about enough food. A glass of milk or one sweet bun made a lot of difference to a chronically starving young girl. Only there and then did I put a black

curse on all slave work

Shifts lasted 12 hours particularly unpleasant insufficient, two of 10 minutes. No matter how than three hours in the up and that was the end coming shift was approaching night was looming and my During the longest 20 minutes the pile of half finished was shaking my arm, tired iron again and carry on daybreak. In the morning to drag ourselves to the we earned so bitterly.

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The Mayski-Sikorski of the German invasion the Prime Minister of the Mayski was the representative the Polish people, the of civilian families was perished in labour camps famine and illness. The Siberia and Kazakhstan was a strange word to us move around. Many were tried to go South where came, half dead and in reorganised army under taken to the orphanages camps and were eventual duration of the war. A

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Shifts lasted 12 hours a day or night. The nights were particularly unpleasant, three breaks in 12 hours were insufficient, two of 10 minutes, one in the middle of 20 minutes. No matter how tired I was I could never sleep more than three hours in the day then the slightest noise woke me up and that was the end of my sleep. The nightmare of the coming shift was approaching, the horror of yet another long night was looming and my nerves were completely shattered. During the longest 20 minute break I was under the table on the pile of half finished garments fast asleep - soon somebody was shaking my arm, time to get up and back to my heavy 4kg iron again and carry on pressing those beastly seams until daybreak. In the morning we did not have enough energy left to drag ourselves to the canteen to try the famous extra food we earned so bitterly.

In July strange rumours were heard - there was talk of a new war. The news of Hitler's attack on Russia spread very mysteriously and quickly, they were at war at long last, those two devils. We Polish girls were overjoyed with the renewed hope of our release but the Russian women were terrified of worse times to come. These poor simple Russian folk knew nothing good or happy, they were always oppressed by their own Tzars or their own commissars.

AMNESTY

The Mayski-Sikorski pact was signed in 1941 at the outset of the German invasion of Russia. General Sikorski was with the Prime Minister of the Polish Government in exile in England. Mayski was the representative on Stalin's side. To save all the Polish people, the captured army and hundreds of thousands of civilian families was impossible. Many had already died, perished in labour camps, coal mines, gold mines or through famine and illness. These people in the vast regions of Siberia and Kazakhstan had committed no crime so the amnesty was a strange word to use for allowing innocent people to move around. Many were too weak to move but those who could tried to go South where the Polish army was assembling. They came, half dead and in rags to be taken by the newly reorganised army under General Anders command. Orphans were taken to the orphanages, civilians gathered in the special camps and were eventually sent to Africa and India for the duration of the war. All able-bodied men and women joined

various battalions, companies and hospitals organised during the winter of 1941-42.

And indeed after three months, slowly, group after group was released into the world outside. Firstly though some more work had to be done - for some time I was sent to the kitchen. During my first week my job was to draw the water from the well; two of us were needed to operate it, one to winch up 25 buckets, the other to empty them into a big barrel on wheels, then a horse pulled it to the boiler room. We took it in turns, it certainly looked easy from a distance, in fact it was backbreaking. The next job was in the tea room. Four big cauldrons of constantly boiling water, the fire beneath was attended by one girl and water supplied by another. Ten big barrels filled the rest of the room. One barrel was under the trough and another girl outside with this horse and barrel-like contraption, delivered fresh water all day. Soon the receiving barrel was overflowing and I had to pour the extra water into other barrels, all 1600 buckets of it.

People working in the kitchens had their bread ration cut by half. It really stands to reason, if you are working near the very heart of the matter, namely kitchens, you are bound to pinch some extra food here and there. As everybody had an empty jam jar in their pocket any opportunity was a good one. I filled my jar at the end of the day with left overs from the kitchen and took it to my friend Janka. We sat at the end of the bunks and ate, in return, Janka made daring expeditions in the middle of the night, behind the perimeter fence to the forbidden gardens. Being very slim she rolled under parallel rows of barbed wire stretching 12 feet high with similar prickly walls of about 4m apart, constantly patrolled by guards with dogs. As soon as they turned corners and the sentry on corner tower was not looking Janka and a few others raided the gardens and rolled back in a flash sharing the loot with close friends in the barracks. Had the guards turned for a fraction of a second sooner, Janka and the others would have been shot on the spot.

We were still waiting for our release, in the meantime harvest time was approaching fast. All workers from the factories, embroidery works, the shoe factory and many others were sent on to the fields to cut corn, dig potatoes and clear up the gardens, doubly important in view of approaching war. I and many others were sent yet again to the lake, now dry and completely overgrown, to cut more fuel for the winter.

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With good weather the daily norm was accordingly raised to 90 sheaves per day. Ready to start columns with guards and dogs all waited just outside the main gate. Work started quickly enough, each of us marked an individual row of ready to count sheaves. Very soon the little area was exhausted and we had to move further on into a more densely covered patch but not before the supervisor entered the individual results in her notebook. Further in we cut a little clearing and, hidden from everybody, had a little rest. Then "borrowing" from the neighbouring slave, we constructed a new row and again called the supervisor to count. In the evening each of us had an imposing row of neatly arranged 90 sheaves. One lives and learns. The whole idea of Russian camps was for re-education, after all. We cared not much if their total figures did not tally.

The lake was a breeding ground for mosquitoes. Each day a lady in a black dress gave yellow tablets to everybody as a prevention against Malaria. The lady's name was Jagoda, the sister of a famous politician who had been given a death sentence for opposing Stalin in the Trotsky purge in 1937. She, just as other members of the family, was declared guilty by the sheer bad luck of belonging to the wrong family at the wrong time. Such a human touch of Soviet law! From the lake we were sent to work in the gardens as tomatoes and cucumbers were ready for harvesting. At long last vitamins were freely available - we could eat them to our hearts content. The only penalty was severe dysentery.

FREEDOM IN RUSSIA

The day came for our little group to be set free. Everybody was given temporary documents and papers entitling them to a free passage, also some "earned" money and a choice of place to go to and settle. In theory we could go anywhere, er, providing it was in the Alma-Ata region or the Tashkent area. Both places were just exotic names on a long forgotten map. For some reason we chose Alma-Ata. So on the 13th of September 1941, watched by tearful and more than envious Russian women, we climbed a big lorry and got a lift to the station at Akmolinsk. At last freedom, so often seen in our dreams really had come. Being a thousand miles from home was not the ideal situation but our unshakable belief that soon, even that dream would come true, gave us all the confidence in the world. Before leaving the Akmolinsk camp I received two parcels from home and two letters, in Russian of course to facilitate

censoring. There was sad news. My grandmother and our beloved Auntie Pola died soon after my arrest, there was no news of Dana's whereabouts, nor Witek's. My father and step-mother had gone to her family near Lwow in the south of Poland, as all the country had now become Hitler's extended domain. In one parcel I found my old parrot-coloured bath robe, a nightie, a small pillow and a tin cup (mug). The people in Poland were starving but somehow my family had managed to scrape a bag of sugar, some bacon and a tin of biscuits. Every bit of food was generously sprinkled with my hot and salty tears. Out of the multi-coloured robe I created a three-quarter jacket padded with stolen padding from the factory and lined with my lovely embroidered nightie, it was a good item for the coming second winter in Russia, and my old friend the sheepskin coat was coming with us too.

So, provided for any eventuality we boarded a train in the general direction of our destination - Alma-Ata but to get a connection in the right way in those troubled times was not that easy. There was a great exodus from the Ukraine before the advancing Hitler's army. Packed trains were passing continuously from the West to the East but not in a straight line. We had to go North first to Omsk about 500km north from Karaganda. Omsk lies on the shores of the enormous Siberian River Irtysh - quite a majestic sight.

Here the first trouble came - no further trains were available to the thousands of waiting civilians, no matter what nationality. All trains were for the army only. Helplessly our little group stood with hundreds of others. We noticed that one young soldier was watching us. You never know from where help may come. The young Russian soldier came to us asking the usual questions "Who are we, where are we going, etc." He was only 18 and was going himself in the opposite direction to join his regiment at the front. Soldiers travelled without our problems of course, having priority on every form of transport especially going to the front. He must have liked my long (by now) plaits perhaps, because after a few hours of talking and walking round the square he suddenly came up with a solution. He just grabbed my arm and dragged me to an office at the other side of the station, an Army Office to be precise. He told the surprised officer that his family was travelling to Alma-Ata but had no transport. Could he have some help as he was himself going in the opposite way, to the front. He got the necessary pass and quickly pushed all seven of us on to the goods train which had just arrived. It was overcrowded already. Pietia

managed to ask me out and the train with several very grateful for his letter from him forward found ourselves. I was alive from this war?

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managed to ask me our presumed address, waved an arm in salute and the train with seven Polish girls left his life. We were very grateful for his unselfish help, I even received one letter from him forwarded to me at the kolhoz where we finally found ourselves. I wonder what his chances were of coming out alive from this war? Much smaller than mine I should think.

At the stops at various stations the main pursuit was to quickly dash to the restaurant and grab any food available. On the stations, very funny to us but perfectly reasonable to the natives, a very big slogan was displayed "We shall give more boiling water to the Fatherland". Indeed, there were hot water taps on the walls of every station, people were always dashing to these taps. With a little boiling water and some dry weeds pretending to be tea leaves, one can produce a life-saving drink. Many lives were saved in this way in the freezing climate of Mother Russia. The eternal jam jar on a piece of string, a piece of dry bread in one's pocket was a way of life-care of the listening government in the form of hot taps. What could be better for survival? Still thinking these lofty thoughts we slowly rolled down South.

One day after almost two weeks of travel some strange white clouds appeared high up in the sky but their strange sharp shapes made me look up again. They were not clouds but snow-clad high peaks of mountains, the Tien-Shan range. The train was coming to Alma-Ata at last, our unloading point. Once outside the station the question arose what to do next. The town itself, like most small Russian towns consisted of wooden houses, a few bigger ones in the centre of the town, perhaps offices, tree-lined streets with trams and even sheltered tram stops. There was very little traffic, lorries with chimneys at the sides and the fuel for them was provided by burning small logs and steam. The rest of the traffic was mainly donkeys with colourful Kazakhs on top of the poor beasts, and the wife with an equally heavy load trotting behind.

Myself and Janka were voted by the others to go to the special office and ask for assistance. Our money had gone, food was almost unobtainable, help was badly needed. In every town there was a special office to help newly released prisoners (the turnover in this country was fantastic). So there we went, found the proper official, explained our situation and received 30 roubles each for further expenses. He also advised us to go to Talgar, a small town 25kms into the hills on the first available lorry going there.

Kolhoz Marks and Engels was supposed to accept us for work and accommodation but the night was just about to fall.

We spent this in the tram-shelter on my faithful sheepskin coat spread on the ground. At the first clanking of the morning tram, the time came to move on. We managed to catch a lorry on the road to Talgar and reported to the Brigadier, the Head of the Kolchoz. From this little town another lorry took us a further 5kms to the Kolchoz Headquarters.

KOLCHOZ IN TALGAR

The wooden shack with no floor and one long platform to sleep 10 together, one iron boiler with a chimney pipe and the table was to be our home for the next seven months, from the end of September to April the following year. Next door in another small room was a young woman living with her 5 year old child. Her function was to cook every day a little "lepioszka" (flat sort of soda bread) for each of us and once a day some cabbage soup called "szczy". That was served to other workers if there was any work to do on the farm.

All the other workers lived in Talgar in their own homes and only came to this place for work. At this time of the year we were still harvesting the various produce of the fields and orchards. Although the apples were already gathered from their sheltered plots, there were still melons of various flavours, water melons, vegetables and potatoes to be lifted and sent by lorries to the A-A station and further to the country. By the way, Alma-Ata in Kazakhs language means "Father of the apples". In October it was getting quite cold, the storage, a long low building was full of potatoes, in the fields big mounds of them were covered with straw and soil ready for the snow and frost. We were still not quite ready with all this harvesting when the first snow came. A little brook just outside our hut, our main water supply, was much too cold for washing our clothes and ourselves, and hair washing was a sheer nightmare.

Another huge building on the other side of the yard was an enormous stable for almost 100 horses. Their night watchman was an old friend of ours and every night he used to bring us big armfuls of coarse and prickly weeds, un-eaten by the horses. In this way we had some fuel for heating water, much needed for washing. In appreciation for this man's kindness we kept quiet about his nightly trips to the grain store where he helped himself to a few kg's of wheat for his private enterprise.

The month of November brought few changes to our routine, snow covered everything. Still, Mika, one of our group used

to load a rucksack full of food, some of it not very edible and walk 5kms to the Head of the Kolchoz, Januszajtis with her son, who had never been to school, lived, and relied on M.

THE

Shortly before Christmas I was in charge of our kolchoz. I was an Officer from Odessa, a man who lived in quieter parts than the rest of the country. Hitler. With his wife and children found themselves in a position of some importance. Some of the native Kazakh population deliberately resettled in the area. Russians never liked to be resettled, but both sides were forced to do so, which was never safe in the past. It might be repeated to talk to us feeling safe about anything to anybody.

In his younger days I was considerably more experienced. In the first World War I was in Polish territory and I recall his various experiences. Of all he talked a lot about was the second war when he got a job as an administrator in a Polish town of Zloczow. In my opinion anybody's dream was not for him. He often said that everybody had a radio, but taxis were on telephones. His only remaining wish was to go again to Zloczow.

I met another dreamer who was marked for the army in Sicily of which he had heard. I wonder if young Wolc's dream allowed to come true. He had come from Russia in the West.

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to load a rucksack full of potatoes and anything else which was
edible and walk 5kms to Talgar, where her friend Hanka
Januszajtis with her sister-in-law and her two little girls
lived, and relied on Mika's help for food.

THE BRIGADIER'S TALE

Shortly before Christmas a new Brigadier took over the
charge of our kolchoz. He was a retired Russian Merchant Navy
Officer from Odessa, a Party member seeking refuge and a job
in quieter parts than his home in the Ukraine, occupied by
Hitler. With his wife, daughter and grand-children they all
found themselves in Talgar and he, as a Party member, held a
position of some importance - a Brigadier. Apart from the
native Kazakh population there were numerous Russian families
deliberately resettled before the war, to mix with backward
tribes and to encourage a more advanced way of life. The
Russians never liked this artificial situation, the Kazakhs even
less, but both sides were afraid of voicing their opinions
which was never safe in Russia - you never knew when or where
it might be repeated to your peril. The new Brigadier liked to
talk to us feeling safe as none of us was likely to repeat
anything to anybody.

In his younger days as a sailor he travelled the world so
was considerably more knowledgable than most of his compatriots.
In the first World War he was fighting the Austrian troops on
Polish territory and learned a bit of Polish. He liked to
recall his various experiences from those early days but most
of all he talked a lot about his last post during the beginning
of the second war when already retired in a civilian role, he
got a job as an administrator of the newly occupied little
Polish town of Zloczow. This eastern "hole" was never in our
opinion anybody's dream place. Small, backward, forgotten but
not for him. He often recalled the happy days in a town where
everybody had a radio, many houses had flush toilets, motor
taxis were on telephone call and many similar signs of "Kultura".
His only remaining wish before his death was to go back once
again to Zloczow.

I met another dreamer, a boy of 16, a stable hand already
marked for the army in the near future, whose dream was to go
to Sicily of which he had read in his school geography book.
I wonder if young Wolodia survived the war and if his dream was
allowed to come true. After all we do not see many tourists
from Russia in the West ...

The Brigadier in the meantime tried to do his best to salvage the still uncollected crops from the snow-clad fields. By chance we had found a little patch of frozen sweet carrots and some garlic outside our hut and were stuffing ourselves with them. I nearly paid with my life for this feast as my stomach did not care much for the frozen food and I fainted when vomiting, some of it went the wrong way, almost choking me to death. Pneumonia developed quickly and after 10 days lying in a corner of the hut on the sheepskin, I somehow survived.

Christmas was coming fast. There was occasional work of loading lorries with stored potatoes in our care and it earned each of us a small sum of money. I badly needed a new pair of boots as my old ones were almost non-existent and snow and frost covered the whole world. After a quick visit to the local market I managed to find a pair of high boots. The bottom part was made of old tyres, the upper sewn to it made of stiff tarpaulin. It was all this market could offer. The shops in Talgar had nothing but vodka and ice-cream - we did not want or need either of these.

In Talgar there were some more Polish people living beside Hanka Januszajtis and her family. Her house was a centre point for various gatherings and meetings so this time she extended her hospitality, organising a Christmas Eve party. We arrived as usual with potatoes pinched from the store, garlic to remind us of salami and our daily ration of lepioszka. For this special occasion everyone dug out some well hidden items of clothing. Wlada just turned her black coat inside-out revealing beautiful persian lamb fur on its right side, which when worn with her high white boots, amazed not only the natives but us as well. In her pre-war days she was a very wealthy lady, she certainly looked the part tonight. Mika found some forgotten pieces of lipstick and a big flowery shawl and with her jet black hair, looked like a princess. I abandoned my multi-coloured jacket and put on a freshly presented gift from American War Aid, a plain black anorak and looked more human for that. Admired by everybody we set out the 5kms. to Hanka's arriving at dusk. The little girls decorated their bare room with paper chains, spruce twigs and set up a table with goodies lovingly prepared by their mother and aunt. Soon the room filled up and everybody was wishing a happier Christmas next year. We were happy of course that the era of the prison and labour camp was over but we were still thousands of miles away from our homes, in an inhuman land.

Tearfully singing hymn which begins with yet conquered, whilst Mazurka called "Dabrowa" a long walk back home of the wolves, so tight

The year 1941 ended New Year 1942 brought an army officer with "Polish" uniform. We could hardly meet of all Polish and it was explained that being re-assembled communities free-(?) resettlements gave him our names and prospective soldiers, for in the very near future joyed. This Officer's page after page contained for news and addresses this huge country.

I also sent my eldest sister Dana and cousin arrived, not from any former Police Inspector (Russia), advising me that Uzbekistan where another would be waiting for me. So the Brigadier issued and myself and two of off to Alma-Ata static stan. Mika (Maria K

The first night camping on the floor along also waiting for their human species. Mixed many Uzbeks, Kirgizmer it was not more than 1 Tien-Shan mountains. with their characteristic very colourful clothing all kinds of settlements being freed from their in this country of ex:

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Tearfully singing carols, finishing with our national
hymn which begins with the significant words "Poland is not
yet conquered, whilst we are still alive" to the tune of
Mazurka called "Dabrowski March". It was too late to attempt
a long walk back home at night and secretly, we were afraid
of the wolves, so tightly packed we slept the night on the floor.

The year 1941 ended on foreign soil.

New Year 1942 brought some fresh hope in the person of an
army officer with "Poland" on the sleeves of his strange
uniform. We could hardly believe such a beast existed. A
meeting of all Polish people in the area was called in Talgar
and it was explained to all present that a new Polish Army was
being re-assembled coming from various prisons, camps,
free-(?) resettlements and such like remote places. We all
gave him our names and were duly entered on to the list of
prospective soldiers, with the promise that we would be sent
for in the very near future. Our little community was over-
joyed. This Officer left a Polish newspaper behind in which
page after page contained entries of peoples' adverts seeking
for news and addresses of their nearest and dearest lost in
this huge country.

I also sent my entry asking for any information regarding
my sister Dana and cousin Witek. Soon in return a postcard
arrived, not from any of them but from my Uncle Alexander, a
former Police Inspector (I had no idea that he too was in
Russia), advising me to go to Guzar in the republic of
Uzbekistan where another Uncle, Josef, a former Army Officer
would be waiting for me and would take further care of me.
So the Brigadier issued an order to bake a sackful of bread
and myself and two of my closest friends Mika and Janka, set
off to Alma-Ata station awaiting the nearest train to Uzbeki-
stan. Mika (Maria Kudlanka -Wosiek), Janka (Janina Perkowska)

The first night of this further adventure we spent sleep-
ing on the floor along with many hundreds of other people,
also waiting for their trains. There was a curious mixture of
human species. Mixed with local natives the Kazakhs, were
many Uzbeks, Kirgizmen, Russian, Polish and even Chinese, as
it was not more than 100kms. from the Chinese border in the
Tien-Shan mountains. Mostly though they were of Mongol origin,
with their characteristically slanted eyes, small stature and
very colourful clothing. From hundreds of miles around, from
all kinds of settlements Polish people came with high hopes of
being freed from their two years of toil, starvation and death
in this country of exile.

MIGRATION OF NATIONS ...

..which means "Wedrowka Narodow" was in full swing. An early morning train took us as far as Tashkent late in the same day. There it stopped and everybody had to leave. The reason for "all out" was increasingly common in those days. No-one could travel unless the pass of "sanobrabotka" was produced. That meant going to the communal bath-house, queueing for hours with literally thousands of others, having a shower and delousing treatment, after which your ruined clothes were returned and you were given an appropriate certificate.

We did not want any of this and so made our way to the ticket office where another crowd waited but near the windows we spotted two Polish Officers almost within the reach of the ticket seller. I made a bee-line for them and asked them to buy three more tickets for us and they readily promised. They themselves had rather a hazy recollection of what was going on, a result of some sampling of the local wine. Unfortunately the ticket-office closed in their faces, however, due to our new friends' exceptionally high confidence, ours too was restored. Back at the platform gates the sound of the train coming was heard, only one obstacle remained, the woman guard at the gates. The crowd started pushing, Stach and Jurek also pushed us in front along with Mika's heavy rucksack. The woman at the barrier fell down and in half a second we sprinted into the train. Once inside everybody took off the easily recognisable coats, mine was parrot-like, a sure give-away. With innocent faces we looked through the windows at the commotion and at the poor girl shouting in rage. She lost face and her prestige and the train moved on. The conductor pretended to see nothing as he shoved a new bottle of spirit into his pocket - Stach and Jurek certainly knew how to pacify the enemy and gain a friend instead. There were two more stops like Tashkent on the way and finally, after three days, we arrived at Guzar. (April 1942)

I made enquiries as to the whereabouts of my Uncle Josef only to learn that he, along with the whole lot of organised battallions had gone to Persia in March, a month earlier.

Stach and Jurek had already rejoined their regiments but helped us with food from their Officers' Mess kitchen. Mika cooked one meal in the evening from the scraps brought

by the boys plus some the rest of our mouldy survived. My Uncle O. Typhoid in Kujbyshev, the three of us managed accepted into the Army

Our immediate prospect sleep in and uniforms up. And so on May 3rd the baking sun on the PWSK (ATS) took a sole freedom of our beloved

Full of hope we a way of life, then their iduals in various sectors administration, transport came to join the 6th Division as a Librarian cum Carpenter a few more girls in the all of us were hard pressed men were seriously ill strange tropical complaints desperately needed, despite pective chemist-pharmaceutical battalion surgery, a new My job was to mix three proportion was changed the Lord above.

Here I met a beautiful whom my friendship has In 1982 I went to Canada They live in Ottawa and Toronto. Poor Hanka parents with three girls advancing German army her father was a school Lwow to some relations the "Liberators" - Russian Hitler in the destruct for themselves. All v

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by the boys plus some non poisonous weeds from the fields and the rest of our mouldy crumbs from our Talgar bread. Thus we survived. My Uncle Oles was not there either, being ill with Typhoid in Kujbyshev, hundreds of miles away, so in the end the three of us managed to find the right office and got accepted into the Army.

Our immediate problems ended, we had food, tents to sleep in and uniforms in which to dress - things were looking up. And so on May 3rd, standing in our neatly formed rows in the baking sun on the side of the hill, the newly formed PWSK (ATS) took a solemn oath to serve day and night for the freedom of our beloved Poland.

Full of hope we did our introductory course in the army way of life, then there were further courses to train individuals in various sections of necessary skills, nursing, administration, transport etc. After a few weeks my orders came to join the 6th Battalion of Light Artillery in Jakkobag as a Librarian cum Canteen Officer in the unit. There I met a few more girls in the same kind of service, but in reality all of us were hard pressed into nursing duties as most of the men were seriously ill with Malaria, Dysentery and many more strange tropical complaints. Many were dying, help was desperately needed, drugs almost non-existent. I as a prospective chemist-pharmacist, found myself at the back of the battalion surgery, a medical student was dealing with patients. My job was to mix three kinds of available powders, only the proportion was changed for each patient, the rest was left to the Lord above.

JAKKOBAG
HANKA'S STORY

probably Hanka
Zwierzanska - Dębicka

Here I met a beautiful girl called Hanka only 17, with whom my friendship has survived till this day 40 years later. In 1982 I went to Canada to visit her and her husband, Andrew. They live in Ottawa and their daughter and grand-children near Toronto. Poor Hanka had a very hard time in Russia. Her parents with three girls and a granny tried to escape the advancing German army from the western town of Tczew, where her father was a school Headmaster, to the eastern town of Lwow to some relations. Soon all the family was captured by the "Liberators" - Russians - whose army had just helped Herr Hitler in the destruction of Poland, taking half the country for themselves. All visitors legally domiciled in the West

were packed into goods trains and transported willy-nilly to Siberia, Kazakhstan or other equally exotic lands, They called it "Free resettlement". As Russians officially came to free the oppressed classes from the exploitation of overlords, how anyone could call Hanka's father an overlord? Perhaps someone here from the Communist Party would like to explain or justify it. I can only wonder at Mr. Benn's eternal gratitude to the Russian State for their sacrifice in the last war as he once said, thus saving many British lives. Does he not remember any longer of their help to Hitler in 1939? Anyway Hanka's family's place of resettlement and work was not far from the Chinese border. As only two girls from the family were able to work, the rest being too young or too old or too sick, food was very short indeed. Hanka and her sister Krysia were working in the gold mines and despite very strict searches the youngsters managed to smuggle some gold dust in their trouser belt buckles, which in turn in the moonless nights, were carried across the border to China and exchanged for tea. Back on the Russian side you could have as much bread for your tea as you could eat.

Now Hanka and Andrew live and work in Canada, have a comfortable house in Ottawa and another in Florida, where the climate is kind to her poor hands, ruined by the poisonous work in Russian gold mines.

EXIT FROM RUSSIA

Two weeks before I left Guzar my Uncle Oles arrived, thin and weak after the widespread illness of Typhoid which claimed many lives of the weak and severely undernourished Polish people. Many children were left orphaned, many parents had to bury their children with their bare hands. I was lucky to survive and not to catch anything worse than Malaria and Dysentery, but that came a little later.

The summer of 1942 was hot in these parts, the cotton fields were ripening. In September our army was again getting ready for evacuation. Train after train load took us to the southern part of Russia to the Caspian Sea; from the windows of the train all we could see was barren desert, only occasionally passing some well known places like Samarkand and Bokhara or the mighty river Amu-Daria.

On my way there I got my first attack of Malaria. I lay on my bunk semi-conscious with a splitting headache and a high temperature. On the third day the train stopped -

everybody out. The rain and it was necessary height of at least 10 a small one, a kit-bag that after my jump I seeing my predicament to my rescue. We then to the road leading to the side of the Caspian Sea lorries but we and then to the beach and awaited

The Russian ship other side, to the point days camping on the beach experienced another trip

All our personal regimental codes and beach, unit by unit. the exception of myse was very important to personal documents we matter in all Communist says so on his identification was in question. But until dark fell then we next morning. Totalled dug a little hole in morning somebody shook smile on his face, he regiment's pile, wrong a relief ... We had out of this unpleasant

SEA CAMP

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everbody out. The railway lines were high up an embankment and it was necessary to jump straight down into the sand, a height of at least 10 feet with all our gear, a big rucksack, a small one, a kit-bag, all on the shoulders. Loaded like that after my jump I could not get up but my kind friend Mika, seeing my predicament (after my bad attack of Malaria), came to my rescue. We then managed to slide down the embankment on to the road leading to the port of Krasnowodsk on the Russian side of the Caspian Sea. The heavy luggage was taken on the lorries but we and the soldiers were told to march the 5 miles to the beach and await further orders.

The Russian ship "Zdanow" was supposed to ferry us to the other side, to the port in Iran - Pahlevi. Indeed after three days camping on the beach, Zdanow arrived but not before I experienced another traumatic moment!

All our personal belongings which were duly marked with regimental codes and numbers were dumped into big piles on the beach, unit by unit. Everybody managed to find their own with the exception of myself and one Lieutenant, Olek Swiercz. It was very important to get hold of the small bag in which our personal documents were kept, as everybody in Russia (for that matter in all Communist countries), no person exists unless it says so on his identity paper, so our whole exit from Russia was in question. Both of us checked for the hundredth time until dark fell then with heavy hearts we had to stop until the next morning. Totally depressed I rejoined my luckier mates, dug a little hole in the sand and fell asleep. In the early morning somebody shook my arm, it was Olek with a triumphant smile on his face, he had found both our bags on the other regiment's pile, wrongly dumped by careless soldiers. O, what a relief ... We had our papers after all which would take us out of this unpleasant country where so many were left forever.

SEA CROSSING RUSSIAN STYLE

Two more days camping by the pier and then we embarked in an organised way on to the waiting ship. It was a very small ship to accommodate all these waiting people. Not only were there army units but a lot of civilians too, several hundreds of them, and an orphanage, so the space to sit on our piled gear was very small, not even a hope of lying down for the sick or weak, we just sat like broken sardines. There was just enough room for the senior officers and a few of us ATS girls under the swaying life boats on top deck. I climbed into one of the boats and remained there for the whole of the

day, for the night Mika and I crawled to the forbidden zone - a corridor on the Captain's deck. Sleeping tightly by the wall the crew had to step over us swearing, but we just did not care.

The crossing was rough and as everybody suffered from Dysentery the queue to the toilets built up on each side of the lower deck and was long and continuous. Once you went through the queue you had to take your place at the end again as waiting for a fresh visit was long enough to become an urgency again. Many young children from the orphanage could not stand the dreadful journey and many elderly civilians, weakened by various diseases died during the 24 hour crossing and had to be buried at sea. An aunt of my good friend had such a burial.

The following day the ship anchored well outside the small and shallow port of Pahlevi. A smaller boat came alongside and half of the passengers had to jump into it. Women and children first in the old international tradition, the other half had to wait for their turn to be transported to the pier. We were lucky to be included in the first consignment. The sea became very rough, it was impossible to bring the small boat alongside and the rest of the passengers had to wait for two more days for their ferry to dry land. There were more burials at sea. The only comfort for the sea-sick was more room on the decks to be sick on, so when finally they joined us they had one more disease to cope with - a Jaundice.

On the landing pier a surprise was awaiting the poor victims fresh from the Zdanow - a Polish orchestra greeted us with the Polish National Anthem. Surprise was too weak a word to express our feelings, many kneeled and kissed the ground of the free world, thankful to be delivered from the devil to the promised land of freedom. There was not a dry eye around; despite the fact that war was still on, we were so much nearer to our goal.

The short distance to our allocated section of the beach and temporary tents was interrupted by a check-point, the sanitary post. Here we all had to go for a shower, hair wash and our clothes were fumigated to exclude any potential insect stowaway from Russia, so cleaned up, a fresh set of uniforms was issued - tropical ones, such as shorts, airtex shirts etc.

September was still warm enough to swim in the sea, to rest and to eat strange food which was abundant in dates, pomegranates and hard boiled eggs, sold by the local boys.

The first payment of a fee (time) enabled us to buy Persian kiosks along the important free Post Office mostly notices of our arrival and such like. Mika left for Hanka Janusza in Teheran.

Very shortly a replacement restaurant on the outskirts previous promise that the world would stand a proper arrangement, and Hanka would obtain passes for the eating place. First the how, where, etc., then for each of us, a treat long time. Mika and Hanka feast but my stomach he mine, coming to a painful bit, full stop. Mika arrived till many years later.

Here I met my Uncle unit moved away and we beach. Soon after the ing as the black flag wa Then the lorries came to day journey across Iran moon-like landscape, also of yellow, beige, brown some streams flowed the habitation. At very rare for sale dates, grapes trouble was we had no more provided us with dry rain

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The first payment of a few toumans (Persian currency at that time) enabled us to buy these things and a few others in the Persian kiosk along the beach. These also served as a very important free Post Office where we left all sorts of messages, mostly notices of our arrival, enquiries for families, friends and such like. Mika left a message giving details of our arrival for Hanka Januszajtis who had arrived in March and was in Teheran.

Very shortly a reply came asking for a meeting in a small restaurant on the outskirts of Pahlevi, near our camp. Our previous promise that the first one to arrive to the free world would stand a proper meal for the other two, was to be arranged, and Hanka would treat us to it. Mika and I duly obtained passes for the afternoon and we met at this modest eating place. First there were tearful greetings and talk of how, where, etc., then came the food - a whole roasted chicken for each of us, a treat we had been dreaming of for a long, long time. Mika and Hanka ate steadily through this lucullus feast but my stomach had shrunk and I managed only half of mine, coming to a painful halt. I could not swallow one more bit, full stop. Mika and Hanka did not forgive me for this till many years later.

Here I met my Uncle Oles briefly again but shortly his unit moved away and we stayed for a further two weeks on the beach. Soon after the sea was so rough we had to stop swimming as the black flag was hoisted at the edge of the surf. Then the lorries came to collect almost everyone for a four day journey across Iran then Iraq. It was all go, through a moon-like landscape, along dry high mountains of various shades of yellow, beige, brown and fawn. In the deep valleys where some streams flowed there was a little greenery and some human habitation. At very rare stops Arabs appeared and offered for sale dates, grapes and other delicious things, the only trouble was we had no money to buy them, still the army provided us with dry rations and tea for each day's travel.

For the night we stopped at the pre-arranged camps at Kazwin, Hammadan and Kermanshah and early morning after some black tea and a piece of bread the back breaking drive started again. The local drivers engaged for the transport had their own ideas as to the speed and economy. The ascent went quite sedately, cutting corners but going down engines were switched off (saving petrol) and the speed was like a race track. We just sat tightly holding on to the sides of the lorry and praying that nothing would come from round the corner in the

opposite direction. Driving at fast speed and late into the night kept us all frightened and quiet until the next stop. At some point we crossed the Iran-Iraq frontier. It was rather funny to see the custom officials come out for the head count and to check the papers. They were very elegantly dressed on top in Saville Row jackets worn over long robes which looked more like long night-dresses. On their heads they always wore tooth-checked head scarves with one or more dark bands - very exotic tea towels.

The last stop was Khanaqin which was to be our home for one month. On the left bank of the large and fast River Diyāl thousands of pale grey tents were spread to the horizon. Each regiment, each unit had its own allocated territory. Ours was signposted 6th PAL. Our tent slept six where each of us had enough room to put a folded blanket down, another to cover us and the remainder of our gear above the head. One could stand up in the middle.

The weather was fine to begin with and in the warm, sunny afternoons we had a few free hours inbetween working in the little regimental shop selling toothpaste, razors and dates and in the evening looking after the canteen in a very big tent, serving refreshments to the soldiers and lending our small supply of books. Afternoons were at our disposal when every other day we went to a river, now three to four miles away to do our laundry.

KHANAQIN

The banks of this fast flowing river were packed with soldiers of all kinds and colour all with the same idea. There were Indians, Australians, Canadians, British even Gurkas with their curved knives and Sikhs with their plain, regulation turbans. Khaki was the colour of everything, no wonder I do not care any more for this particular shade, I think it is called "over-exposure". On the opposite bank was a very big oil refinery eternally belching black smoke, threatening us with soot when the wind was blowing in the wrong direction.

One day an unexpected present came my way. A Sikh soldier was washing his turban when a strange object flew his way. After fishing it out and examining same, he smilingly offered it to me. As it happened it was a pair of ladies green army knickers, of no use to him, some unlucky ATS girl had lost them in the wash higher up the river and I gained an extra pair of underwear which was in very short supply.

October was almost ing a new and nasty sid this part of the world Most of our tents were of yards to the neighbo returned them after goo of the garments themsel we got our things back The general shaking of hours until the next ha exodus to the river for law was, as the local A uous days of the nerve- his wives there was no forgave him as the wind which time we had moved

The first night wa newly erected tent whic during the night's gale and clothing and spent tent which was more str was repaired, clothes d The winter routine was part of the 8th British Persian coast. As the the Polish we had to re ways of doing almost ev desert was not a very p little protection from snow. We still worked better equipped and als with a little show and modest celebration with national costumes for t

The Christmas of 1 year before. We had foc Russia, the fact that w added a feeling of secu

On Christmas Eve a everyone had the same w be at home - in Poland.

Being so far from going on there. Lack c to any joy. We had no

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October was almost upon us and the weather started showing a new and nasty side. The strong winds called Hamsins in this part of the world blew sharp, blinding sand with them. Most of our tents were flattened and our clothes blown hundreds of yards to the neighbouring regiments. Friendly soldiers returned them after good humoured joking, often modelling some of the garments themselves or demanding ransoms. In the end we got our things back and our tents were secured once again. The general shaking of blankets followed for the next few hours until the next hamsin, and the next morning saw a big exodus to the river for a wholesale clean up. The unwritten law was, as the local Arabs believed, that after five continuous days of the nerve-racking wind, if an Arab killed one of his wives there was no prosecution for his actions. Allah forgave him as the wind was to blame. Then the rains came, by which time we had moved some distance away to Kizil Ribatt.

The first night was nothing short of catastrophic. Our newly erected tent which was not very firmly secured, collapsed during the night's gale and we gathered our soaked blankets and clothing and spent almost the whole night in the sick-bay tent which was more strongly built. Next morning the damage was repaired, clothes dried and no more accidents occurred. The winter routine was worked out for all units. We were now part of the 8th British Army from the day of landing on the Persian coast. As the British organisation was different from the Polish we had to reorganise ourselves and adopt to new ways of doing almost everything. Although the winter in the desert was not a very pleasant one, the flimsy tents gave little protection from the cold wind and rain, there was no snow. We still worked in the 6 PAL shop-cum canteen, now much better equipped and also started preparations for Christmas with a little show and dance (Mazurka and Kujaviak) for a very modest celebration with the battalion, making colourful national costumes for these well known national dances.

The Christmas of 1942 was very different to the one the year before. We had food, shelter and were many miles from Russia, the fact that we belonged now to the mighty 8th Army added a feeling of security and hope.

On Christmas Eve after Midnight Mass out in the open, everyone had the same wish again, that the next one would surely be at home - in Poland.

Being so far from Europe no-one knew for sure what was going on there. Lack of communication was a terrible barrier to any joy. We had no idea what inhuman treatment European

countries had to endure from Hitler's army or Hitler's paranoia about Jews. We in the army were now in reasonably good physical shape and were making ourselves ready for combat. The various units were familiarising themselves with newly received weapons and other hardware. Most of the surviving civilians such as women with children, the old and sick, were sent to sheltered camps in Africa and India to await the end of the war. We firmly believed that the time would come soon to settle our scores with Germans - sooner or later.

SPRING IN IRAQI DESERT

The winter of 1943 was turning to Spring. In March the prickly dry desert which stretched just outside our tents far into the hills, suddenly became green and unbelievably burst into a flowering riot of wild anemones.

Fresh orders came to move to a new area near the town of Kirkuk to stand guard around a huge oil refinery there. The actual move came in April. Once again column after column drove in a very efficiently organised fashion across the desert on newly constructed (for this purpose) roads. Should read: newly "oiled" strips of sand. On both sides of the road the now green desert was enchanting. We had to stop in the open for the night and we spread our camp beds (new sign of increasing opulence) amongst the astonishing carpet of flowers, daffodils, tulips, primroses, fragrant stocks and many unknown varieties. It must have been Allah himself who planted all those beauties for his Glory. Alas, a very short one for in May the fierce sun burned it all and once again the familiar sight of yellow, dry and prickly desert returned. The Garden of Eden was nothing again, only creepy-crawlies roamed with scorpions topping the list, to our constant torment. I had found one in my boot but apart from causing me a nasty shock it did me no harm, as we had orders to shake our boots every time before putting them on. Others were not so lucky however, there were many painful bites" and we had no treatment for these. Fortunately nobody died as they were not a deadly variety, just very painful. Some other insects were supposed to be poisonous, such as Falangas but I never could identify them so I can't be sure what they really were.

During the night the howling of the Jackals was heard just outside the perimeter of the camps. They were looking for food - just the same the night-guards did not relish

their task very much.

In June the heat was their daily training at 4 for eight and then relax the rest of the day. To a considerable effort as the morning we were start Mess for our breakfast, e down mercilessly. Then c gave our tent a long soak On the well soaked rush n lay covered with damp she exhausting stroll for lur arrived at last and for c the Mess. It was cool er and have a civilised chat that was the only time or

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In June the heat was unbearable. Soldiers were starting their daily training at 4 o'clock in the morning to be back for eight and then relax (or slowly bake) in their tents for the rest of the day. To go for their meal to the kitchen was a considerable effort as it was to us all also. At seven in the morning we were starting our slow walk to the Officer's Mess for our breakfast, even at this early hour the sun beat down mercilessly. Then our neighbours the Engineer's Company gave our tent a long soak with a hose from the water tank. On the well soaked rush matting on the ground we either sat or lay covered with damp sheets and tried to survive. Another exhausting stroll for lunch, another rest until blissful evening arrived at last and for dinner we all gathered once again in the Mess. It was cool enough to sit down on the canvas chairs and have a civilised chat at last, darkness fell quickly but that was the only time one could relax in this climate.

On Sundays there were trips some 30 miles away to the River Little-Zab. On to a big lorry went folding chairs, benches and most important of all, a big thermos full of cold drinks, also sandwiches. After driving for an hour or so the river announced itself by a broad strip of green bushes and trees. We had glorious swims and lovely picnics in the shade and so re-charged, we returned to camp. Meanwhile further reorganisation was under way.

Firstly all the girls were taken away from various battalions, companies etc. and sent to a central camp right at the foot of that big Kirkuk oil refinery. All our friends were left behind and all young girls under 18 were sent to Palastine to school to complete their various stages of education. My friends Hanka Zwierzanska, Irka Grinczak, Halinka Laniewska and many others said sad goodbyes and left for Nazaret. We felt rather sad and forgotten ourselves but not for long. *Debicka*

On the third day a jeep full of our friends from the 6th PAL arrived for a short visit, in fact it was a reconnaissance and was followed next day by a lorry loaded full of boxes of fruit, cakes and other goodies and also full of smiling faces of faithful friends. As it was Sunday we all went to the river once more.

Another Autumn was approaching with it's awful hamsins. We were in the middle of a driving course, full of driving practice trips over the endless desert. There were also a lot of theoretical lectures full of problems such as "What to do if you don't know what to do?" We hammered over and over again on practice vehicles such as a 3-ton open Ford with left hand

drive or a big Dodge with a right hand drive. With one behind a wheel and an instructor, the rest standing on the top and loudly praying (or more often criticising), the poor idiot at the wheel never had much encouragement and it did not help to inspire much confidence. When the next hamsin struck all came to a halt, even the kitchens were unable to work. Despite the very intense heat the tents had to be tightly closed in order to stop the driving sand, even so it found its way into our hair, eyes, mouth and clothing. There was no question of any activity outside, nothing could be seen anyway, the only thing to do was to sit it out. After the hamsin finally ceased, as usual there was a general shake up, clean up and hair wash-cum shower, until the next one! Soon another move was on the agenda, this time to Palestine.

We sure are going to see the world and again enormous convoys of lorries were waiting. At dawn at the end of September the long journey began. Eight days on the move across the Iraqi desert, through Jordan to Palestine, the thin ribbon of the tarmac road stretched endlessly to the horizon where the shimmering water promised some refreshment during the hot and dry journey, only there never was any water where we hoped, it was simply a mirage, so at the end of each day the pre-arranged overnight camp appeared with field kitchens ready with an evening meal and rows of empty tents to receive weary travellers. The desperate lack of washing and hygiene facilities, especially for women, had to be endured in silence. This world was obviously not meant or created for women.

After unloading our overnight gear and a good night's sleep the morning did not seem too bad. A good breakfast then dry rations for the day and most important, a full canvas container of water plus a metal flask with tea minus milk or sugar, were a great help. Water was precious for drinking but tea was better for washing teeth and faces and was very good indeed. Try to wash your teeth in milky tea! On the road again. The seventh day was spent traversing the Jordanian Black Desert. All the rocks, cliffs and sand were black and looked very disturbing and menacing.

In the evening after sunset the stop and order to disembark came. There was something different in the air, even the air was different! My hair lost it's dry and lifeless feeling, becoming soft and curly again. It was the humidity in the atmosphere - we must have finally arrived at the Promised Land of Palestine on it's Mediterranean coast.

The wind that blew stood in between tall shrubs which had brought us to the middle of a Pardess, plantations in Palestine of this nation deprived of dreams and felt a lot of persecuted in many countries extent by Hitler in Europe my own country we were murdered against Jews which were by German propaganda, we be.

Our new camp was on the main road North-South country some 10 miles north of Jaffa. The camp was adequate than any up to now. There was a shower room and many tents. The road was a big cinema and miles across the fields. The practice was a splendid. It was still warm enough to tiny fresh water stream at a point which was very handy in the salty sea.

We carried on with the desert behind our camp plus garages and squares marked. Occasionally a hesitant car with no other traffic, entered. The rest of the time was quiet.

Often we caught a breeze especially Tel-Aviv. No one from Jerusalem, which was where we were living there. They called, or in other words they waited and wait for the war to end.

We also went to Jerusalem tired of exploring ancient ruins up in the Christian faith.

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PALESTINE

The wind that blew came straight from the sea. As we stood in between tall shrubs we wondered at the strange fate which had brought us to the Dream Land of millions of Jews from all over the world. The shrubs were oranges, we were in the middle of a Pardess, as they called their orange plantations in Palestine. I suddenly understood the feelings of this nation deprived of their land, left with longings and dreams and felt a lot of sympathy for them. They were persecuted in many countries but we had yet to learn of the extent by Hitler in Europe during this dreadful war. Even in my own country we were much to blame for student excesses against Jews which were widespread before the war, encouraged by German propoganda, we were not as tolerant as we wished to be.

Our new camp was outside the small village of Bei-Jirja on the main road North-South along the west coast of the country some 10 miles north of Gaza and some 40 miles south of Jaffa. The camp was adapted for a more civilised way of life than any up to now. There were several wooden huts, including a shower room and many tents for sleeping. Just across the road was a big cinema and many good films we saw there. A few miles across the fields which we often crossed on driving practice was a splendid beach, populated by crabs alone. It was still warm enough to go swimming in our spare time and a tiny fresh water stream made it's way into the sea at this point which was very handy for us to have a wash after a swim in the salty sea.

We carried on with our driving lessons on the stretch of desert behind our camp practising with imaginary streets, garages and squares marked with pebbles on the ground. Occasionally a hesitant trip was allowed on a secondary road with no other traffic, encountering donkeys or camels only. The rest of the time was our own.

Often we caught a bus to Gaza, Rehovoth or Tel-Aviv, especially Tel-Aviv. Not only was this the biggest town apart from Jerusalem, which was a long way away, but my two uncles were living there. They were both too old for active service so they and many others like them moved to 2nd group, so called, or in other words, were retired on half salary to live and wait for the war to end.

We also went to Jerusalem several times. We were never tired of exploring ancient sites, so well known to us all brought up in the Christian faith. Our idealistic concept of religiion

received a severe knock when we discovered the rivalry that existed concerning access and division of holy places. The Coptic church, the Orthodox church, Catholic church and a few others waged a constant battle over who possessed what. Each begged money from the tourists and believers for their own needs. Then there was the beautiful Blue Mosque, the holy place of Moslems and on the other side was the Jewish Wailing Wall, another famous place. Quite a concentration of Holiness of many kinds, all of them suffocated by commercial encroachment, a real eye opener for the thinking mind.

The greatest pleasure was a glut of oranges and as export of these was halted due to the war, they were sold for almost nothing. On every street corner and by the side of the roads were stands with a "squasher" orange drink while-u-wait.

Yet another Autumn was closing in, cold nights were replacing balmy ones and sunny but crisp days followed. The wild mimosa bushes and feathery pepper trees were losing their leaves. There was talk of yet another move, this time to Egypt ...

A few days before our departure many photographs were taken to commemorate our stay in Palestine. "Next door" to us was the 22nd Company of Supplies with their mascot, a bear called Wojtek. Soldiers bought him from a Persian boy who had found him as a small cub in the Persian hills abandoned by his mother. They took him to their hearts and to their tents. Time went on and the little cub had grown into a big brown bear with his own quarters. Each time we moved he also changed place and was chained to a strong post and had a permanent keeper. Wojtek was shamelessly spoilt by everybody and developed a strong liking for beer. We borrowed him for a photographic session and he did not object.

The next night I had the bad luck to be on sentry duty at the main entrance to the camp. It was a very dark night and the Arabs from the village decided to raid our neighbours arms store, stealing 16 rifles. This was a serious crime and a loss for us. The Arabs regularly stole small forgotten items on the guy ropes of our tents but we just gritted our teeth and cursed our forgetfulness - this was different. The military police descended on both our units and grilled everybody who was on duty that night. I was very sorry that I did not see or hear a thing. We all blamed the big drunken bear for his lack of vigilance and plain ingratitude for all the love and affection and beer lavished on him in the past. He did not bother to show any remorse.

Egypt here we come inevitable desert. We Mary and Josef had tra We came to a halt at ti would be more imposing Bailey Bridge where the we were in the land of to our destination - t

In the familiar d old friends soon found very useful neighbour department, where we w do some repairs to our sojourn in Russia. Ou an adequate diet was g malaria in the cool of

Another round of a three hour drive to Alabaster Mosque, City with its Sphinx and Py Saccara the famous ste lying on the ground; n One day we drove there were needed for our br been taken recently. us went to celebrate a lovely film. The plea the strong wind invade screen was barely visi to our tents.

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Egypt here we come: two days on the road over the inevitable desert. We imagined that it was the same route Mary and Josef had travelled almost two thousand years ago. We came to a halt at the Suez Canal. I'd somehow imagined it would be more imposing but at this point there was an ordinary Bailey Bridge where the canal was quite narrow and in a minute we were in the land of the Pharaohs. Soon the road brought us to our destination - the camp of Quassasin.

In the familiar desert we joined up with more units where old friends soon found us, giving moral support as usual. One very useful neighbour was hospital No.2 with it's dentistry department, where we were able to take advantage of this and do some repairs to our very neglected teeth, caused by our sojourn in Russia. Our general health owing to our youth and an adequate diet was good, at least those who survived. Even malaria in the cool of the winter did not bother us too much.

Another round of sight-seeing was organised. There was a three hour drive to Cairo with its unique sites such as the Alabaster Mosque, City of the Dead or the neighbouring Gizah with its Sphinx and Pyramids. There was a short trip to Saccara the famous stepped Pyramid and unfinished Sphinx still lying on the ground; nearer was the smaller town of Ismailia. One day we drove there to have our photographs taken as they were needed for our brand new driving licences, which test had been taken recently. Very proud of our achievement a group of us went to celebrate at an open-top cinema to see an old but lovely film. The pleasure was short lived, the night was cold, the strong wind invaded the middle of the auditorium and the screen was barely visible. Cold and disappointed we returned to our tents.

Another Christmas was coming - 1943. Once again after Midnight Mass with the Bear Wojtek, present too, we all wished the same wish: to spend the next one with our nearest and dearest back home. The compulsory tourism was a bit too much, it had its compensations, that of seeing places which otherwise not many of us would be able to even dream of seeing. I forgot to mention that when still in Palestine we visited Bethlehem, the Dead Sea and Jericho. The almost deadly heat of the depression of the Dead Sea was in stark contrast with the shady green oasis of Jericho, where some monks cultivated gardens with the help of water from the River Jordan.

Back in Egypt serious talk of going to the front was the main topic of all conversation. Our Army now organised as the 2nd Polish Corps under General Ander's command, trained in the use of modern armaments was ready for combat. The girls besides

working in the Nursing Service in several Army hospitals or in the Secretarial service at the Army Headquarters, were grouped in two big Transport Companies and one Mobile Canteen Company. I was in the latter one. We also had to familiarise ourselves with several types of hand weapons such as hand-grenades, Tommy-guns, pistols, rifles and had frequent practice with most of these. We prayed to God not to have to use any of them in real life ever.

THE ROAD TO ITALY

In early February 1944 the girls of the two Transport Companies arrived outside our camp in loading order to take us all to a railway station, there on to the waiting train for a fairly short journey to a very big port, Alexandria. Never in my life had I seen so many ships, mainly warships all painted grey standing there enormously tall and menacing. There was no doubt that the war was near. Our orders were to embark on one of them. Carrying all our military gear plus one or two small suitcases acquired during the long stay in Iraq we climbed up to a deck. Soon the engines started throbbing and we were under way. We were part of a big convoy. The middle of the convoy one after another, consisted of large ocean going ships now carrying troops. In front of us sailed a handsome one, we could just make out her name, Stefan Batory, the new Polish ocean liner completed just before the war, now it served the country in a different way. On both sides near the horizon the small destroyers were busily patrolling the area looking for German submarines. The order on decks was not to smoke, not to show any lights, no noise, always wear life jackets and generally be alert. The convoys course was a zig-zag to avoid detection by the Germans, particularly in the area of Crete. On the fourth day a big barrage of floating balloons advertised the Italian port of Taranto in the bay of the same name.

ITALY - FEBRUARY 1944

Despite regular air attacks by the German Luftwaffe our landing and disembarkation proceeded safely and soon all our Company was allocated dry quarters of a kind. It was good to be on dry land, in comparative safety from the submarines even if not from the Luftwaffe. Knowing that we were not a very important target, being well outside Taranto, a big military post, we stayed safely in a large barn-like house

awaiting further orders. The Field Canteen as it was called, was a big place, people, out of those formed and allocated to the Corps. Each canteen had a lorry and orders to receive. Our first assignment was sorting out NAAFI goods, an Irish store and preparing Here was our first canteen base and the strange food offered by them after a hot, very welcome in a drizzly and miserable constant and tents (you ground, only the pink the approaching Spring

One morning when noticed a strange green tents, trees and other that the great Vesuvius ash for miles and miles

Shortly before we sending standard parcels the Red Cross and even German confirming delivery signature which was a how safe?

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awaiting further orders in reorganisation. Our Company of
the Field Canteen as it was finally called, shrank to only 54
people, out of those 10 single units of 4 girls each was
formed and allocated to various battalions in the 2nd Polish
Corps. Each canteen unit was given a number, a big 3-ton
lorry and orders to report to a certain place and an army unit.
Our first assignment was a few miles off Taranto to help
sorting out NAAFI goodies freshly collected from the big Brit-
ish store and prepare them for distribution to our units.
Here was our first contact with the British soldiers at that
base and the strange ritual of a "cuppa" was very kindly
offered by them after loading our lorry. It was strong and
hot, very welcome in the circumstances as the day was cold,
drizzly and miserable. The month was February, the rains almost
constant and tents (yes, again) slowly sank into the muddy
ground, only the pink blossom of the almond trees indicated
the approaching Spring.

One morning when emerging from the cold and muddy tent I
noticed a strange grey powder all over the roofs of all our
tents, trees and other objects. Only much later we learned
that the great Vesuvio had erupted on that day and showered
ash for miles and miles around.

Shortly before we left Palestine we had the chance of
sending standard parcels containing medicines to Poland, through
the Red Cross and everybody did so, and a standard card in
German confirming delivery reached me with my step-mother's
signature which was a sign that at least they were at home, but
how safe?

Nearby in the little Italian village a friendly Artillery
battalion was situated. The village children watched every-
bodys movements often receiving some food and chocolate and
were also learning the Polish language. A song "Antoni
Kociubinski" was heard far and wide sung by the little urchins.
Friends from 6th PAL were organising a little party in our
honour mainly in the form of potato cakes made to an old
country recipe - grated raw potatoes plus grated onions, some
salt and pepper and spoonful by spoonful fried in a little oil.
It was delicious, going extremely well with Chianti and other
Italian wines. This gastronomical feast helped us to forget
the miserable camp. The ground was wet and our camp beds were
slowly sinking into the mud. Our travels in Italy had only
just started. New orders came to get ready for the big move
to the North. Included in the long column of army convoys was
my First Mobile Canteen (read: thundering lorry). Driving on

the narrow and steep Italian roads was very different from the flat desert. With me, always in the cabin was my faithful friend Marysia and somehow with much laborious driving we reached the first post, a little village on top of a hill (as usual in Italy) called Machiagodena. A week later another order came to move further north to Sylvone, in the higher range of hills. It was the first front line where we came under German shelling, which was not in our plans at all. It was explained later that the careless movement of some troops had attracted the enemy fire. The next day, or rather the night, the whole unit along with us and our big lorry had to change positions. The move had to be done under cover of darkness.

Driving in the dark on the twisting narrow road with steep hillside on the right, a steep drop on the left and no lights permitted, was not my idea of travelling. Lights were allowed on the underside of the vehicle on the differential, to show the following driver the direction. I with my new American Dodge was not shown the position and meaning of various knobs and switches and at the first stop my follower soldier gave me a torrent of terrible curses in language I did not even know existed, because I had neglected to show that all important light. He did not realise that behind the wheel was a girl 5'2" tall and only when I asked him to show which switch to press, his apologies were overwhelming. Even so I was lost several times in the dark, coming to cross roads was the worst not knowing which way to turn, one way would surely lead to Germans, the other to safety, but soon the dawn came and the whole column progressed through the beautiful valley of the River Volturno, over the Bridge of 25 Arches to the other side in the general direction of the mountain village Letino.

This road is the most lovely in Italy. It climbs with very sharp bends on almost the sheer side of a high mountain to a pass. In many places our large lorries had to back up twice (or like me) even three times, to take a bend and the fact that very often the road was ruined by mines did not help much. Finally we came to a halt on the flat meadow of the pass. Poor Marysia jumped out of the cabin and asked the first soldier for two cigarettes, one for herself, the other for me in order to calm our frayed nerves. Only then tears began to roll down my face. Marysia admitted that she had prayed for our lorry to tumble down in the steepest part and be smashed to bits with both of us killed in order to

stop my terrified driver lessly. Luckily Marysia shortly on a much better where the road ended connected to we rested for our faithful friends for

The people in this differed much from the which was very colourful with lovely results. The containers and other of Civilisation came in the several years in America himself a house in which It had a toilet and rural isolated we could have

April was coming to again with a short stay canteen and another one area of Monte Cassino & Aquafondata. There with the very first and uncomfortable noise of heavy anti-air over our heads, nobody this was only a foretaste day we were moved to our place, just behind the GPO (first aid point) in a small tent for four weeks after a huge German bombardment the foot of the famous of trying to capture the Forces the honour finally Polish Corps - what they to do.

Monte Cassino was 12th century situated side only. It was headquarters part of the Gustav Line proposed that the 2nd opening the break here Allied Forces to have defence had already committed to spill blood, to win

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lessly. Luckily Marysia's prayers were not answered and
shortly on a much better stretch of road we arrived at Letino
where the road ended completely. There with the unit we were
attached to we rested for two weeks, frequently visited by
our faithful friends from the Artillery.

The people in this village, being fairly isolated,
differed much from the valley people. First their clothing
which was very colourful, was made of home-spun and dyed wool
with lovely results. They also carried leather bags,
containers and other ornaments all made by local craftsmen.
Civilisation came in the form of a local man who had spent
several years in America, brought back some money and built
himself a house in which we had the good luck to be billeted.
It had a toilet and running water, otherwise the place was so
isolated we could have been in the Himalayas.

April was coming to an end. A new order came to move
again with a short stay in Colemacchia, then in Capriati. Our
canteen and another one Nr 2 was selected for duties in the
area of Monte Cassino a little village beyond the hills -
Aquafondata. There with the girls from canteen Nr 2 we spent
the very first and uncomfortable night. The main reason was
not the cramped conditions but the constant and deafening
noise of heavy anti-aircraft artillery, firing horizontally
over our heads, nobody could sleep with this war-music, but
this was only a foretaste of days and nights to come. Next
day we were moved to our proper location and to a much quieter
place, just behind the next hill where incidentally the First
GPO (first aid point) had their brown hospital tents. Our
small tent for four was on the other side of a crater, left
after a huge German bomb. Here I must explain why we were at
the foot of the famous Monte Cassino monastery. After months
of trying to capture it by American, Canadian and British
Forces the honour finally came to General Anders and his 2nd
Polish Corps - what the others could not do, we were supposed
to do.

Monte Cassino was an old Benedictine monastery of the
12th century situated on top of a high hill with access on one
side only. It was heavily fortified, a German stronghold,
part of the Gustav Line blocking the way to Rome. It was
proposed that the 2nd Polish Corps should have the task of
opening the break here and through Piedimonte to enable the
Allied Forces to have access to Rome. The stubborn German
defence had already cost many lives and now it was our turn
to spill blood, to win victory for our country.

The evening of 11th May was very dark and in silence we all waited for the battle to begin, nobody said a word but we all knew, then at 11.0'clock the fire of a thousand guns started. The Germans returned fire with their thousand guns. Our small "Kubusie" reconnaissance planes were flying above in the darkness and very soon one came down with it's pilot gravely wounded - a friend of ours. This was our first casualty to take care of. He survived but never remembered a thing of our meeting after his crash, then some more wounded came followed by more and more in the next few days. With the shelling of both sides night and day ambulances brought wounded to be seen by our doctors and then sent further down to a field hospital. It was like a chapter of Dante's Inferno, in fact the narrow road leading to the valley at the foot of Monte Cassino was called Inferno. Our task initially was to serve tea and coffee to the crew of ambulances and to the sanitary personnel of this First Aid point but the number of wounded was so great that we had to give a hand in the hospital tents as nurses too. There were Male nurses of course but we four were the only females around.

One day a familiar face looked at me from the stretcher. In a state of shock and covered in blood, he still managed to recognise me - it was Bernard. The last pre-war champion in the 100 meters he had been selected for the coming Olympics in Helsinki in 1940 being the first in Europe, having beaten the Germans in the European Championship. The war had changed these plans and now he was on his way to the hospital. In private life he was a young Police Officer working under my Uncle Oles mentioned previously. Even in his sorry state, seriously wounded, his characteristically good humour came through when he asked me for some Vodka to make him a little happier on his way to heaven. Today - retired with his wife and family he lives not far from me and I could not ask for better friends in this life.

Ours was only a transition post where doctors sorted out the living from the dead, giving the necessary injections and with suitable notes sent them on their way to Venafro Field hospital, where there were wards, nurses, operating theatres etc. For specialised and prolonged treatment people were sent even further inland to very big hospitals. Some of the ambulance crews bringing in wounded from the battle field were American volunteers, these boys were very sweet and even invited us for a drink. Their ambulance converted

into a sitting room complete with a door so the four of us, for the drinks alone as English and the boys knew

The struggle at front suddenly on 18th May all the smashed walls of the the Polish white and red hill itself was pitted and splintered close to the poppies - or blood?

The losses were terrible missing. Today the monuments splendidly than before at cemeteries, each country cemetery is a very, very

But the struggle was and the rest of Europe was clearing of Italy, then France, then pushing the and cost many lives. On as ordered by our Command Infantry Brigade, part of Corps.

After Aquafondata at Jelsi, Scerni, Monte Lupo Ostra, Cervia, Senigallia quite often we had to march San Elpidio we had two everyone. Here the tragedy us. The shattering details the liquidation of Warsaw

For us there was so Divisions in close co-operation in hot pursuit of the re again to Arezzo, Giovi, Galeata (almost drowned place), Santa Sofia and the Winter.

The Christmas of 1944 Year saw us in Castro Carpi a further offensive was sunny and warm when the our heads with a dog fight the capture of Bologna

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into a sitting room complete with a "Welcome" sign at the door so the four of us, Stasia, Marysia, Janka and myself went for the drinks alone as none of us could speak one word of English and the boys knew no Polish.

The struggle at fortress-monastery continued until suddenly on 18th May all went quiet. The battle was over. On the smashed walls of the centuries old monastery now in ruins, the Polish white and red flag fluttered in the breeze. The hill itself was pitted with shell craters, trees cut down and splintered close to the ground. The valley below was red with poppies - or blood? The road to Rome was open.

The losses were terrible, almost 4000 killed, wounded or missing. Today the monastery is totally rebuilt even more splendidly than before and the many, many dead sleep in their cemeteries, each country taking care of their own. The Polish cemetery is a very, very big one ...

But the struggle was not over yet, still half of Italy and the rest of Europe was under the German Boot. The slow clearing of Italy, then the creation of the second front in France, then pushing the Germans from Europe took another year and cost many lives. Our small unit of four kept pace, going as ordered by our Commandants, being mostly attached to the 5th Infantry Brigade, part of the 5th Division in the 2nd Polish Corps.

After Aquafondata and a short rest in Venafro we went to Jelsi, Scerni, Monte Lupone, Recanati, Osimo, Mte San Vito, Ostra, Cervia, Senigalia. Sometimes for one or two days but quite often we had to move twice in the same day. In Porto San Elpidio we had two weeks rest, which was badly needed by everyone. Here the tragic news of the Warsaw Uprising reached us. The shattering details of its collapse and the news of the liquidation of Warsaw's Ghetto came later.

For us there was some more travelling. The several Divisions in close co-operation with other Allied Forces were in hot pursuit of the retreating Germans; that meant a move again to Arezzo, Giovi, Strada, St. Paulo, St. Pierro in Bagno, Galeata (almost drowned in mud), Predappio (Mussolini's birth place), Santa Sofia and San Lorenzo. All the latter ones in the Winter.

The Christmas of 1944 was spent in Brisigella, the New Year saw us in Castro Caro, the elegant pre-war resort and Spa, a further offensive was scheduled at Faenza. April was coming, sunny and warm when the fierce battle started straight over our heads with a dog fight of German and British planes. After the capture of Bologna nothing was stopping the Allied forces

in clearing the rest of Italy of German troops. Mussolini was dead. On 8th May, 1945 the war in Italy and in Europe ended.

By chance we stayed in a very small place called Il Ponte - meaning "The Bridge". It was a very small stream that the bridge spanned and by its banks the sweetly scented Accacia trees were growing. Behind the few houses were large orchards of newly ripe cherries. The setting was perfectly romantic but again not for us. To us that long awaited and dreamed of Peace did not mean the end of our problems, the return to our homes, families or country.

In Yalta the three most powerful rulers: Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill were deciding the post-war division of Europe. This stupid act gave away Poland and the rest of East European countries to the Russians and to this day it is causing endless trouble in the rest of the world. As for us, stranded fighters for our country's freedom, there was total denial of a return home. Once again it was under Soviet regime. We all knew that the so called new Polish Government was a sad farce, almost no-one who has gone through Russia once would like to repeat the experience.

The whole Polish Army in Italy was sent to the Adriatic coast for a rest. In very low spirits, with a feeling of betrayal, awaiting further political development we spent most of our spare time on the sandy beaches of San Benedetto. In spite of the gloomy outlook one bright spot appeared in my life, I met Broniek my future husband. At that time he was Chief of Staff in the Headquarters of the 5th Brigade so in between a few hours of work in the canteen in the morning and again in the evening we spent the whole middle of the day happily, if not selfishly on the beautiful and clean and most important, not overcrowded beach of San Benedetto il Tronto. After the evening spell of work in the canteen we often used to visit a shore-front trattoria next to the high-walled fishing port of this small resort. Freshly caught fish, fried and washed down with the local wine tasted delicious. Sometimes a long stroll along the promenade on the other side of the port, bordered with palms, oleanders and low pines made a lovely change. There was a time to visit old friends, a time to make plans for a personal future and to dream of changes for a better world. Here I also received first news of my family.

One morning an Airletter arrived from distant England. My pre-war friend and colleague - Jurek Lerski had learned of my whereabouts. We had been at the Lwow University at the

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same time where, with my cousin Leszek and many others, we belonged to the Students Democratic Organisation, called PMSD short for Polish Soc. Democratic Students Union. "Democratic" was the operative word. Young people of this time were, unfortunately, much under the pro-fascist influence, there was a lot of Jew bashing, Ukrainian antagonism, anti-minorities feeling. To bring some sanity and democratic tolerance we started the Independent Union with much involvement of "Young Peasants" and other similar movements. Jurek was our President in the year before the war, a brilliant student and loyal friend. It was years later that I learned of his fantastic work for freedom in occupied Poland where he was dropped as an emissary of the Polish Government.

Whilst in Warsaw, in exile, to help with the diversive action in 1943 he met my cousin Leszek who told him all about the fortunes of our family. A year later after his own fantastic escape through German occupied Europe to London, he sent me the news of my whole family. It was indeed a very thoughtful and kind act on his part. To this day he remains the most loyal of my friends. After the war Jurek completed his studies in Oxford and subsequently held a position of University Professor in Pakistan, Japan and Ceylon, finally settling down in California as a Professor of European History at San Francisco University. Now as Professor Emeritus, he has more time to write and publish books on Polish historic past and present problems.

Bronek and I were married on 6th October, 1945 in Modena Cathedral and for our honeymoon we visited Venice, Como, Turin, Genoa, Florence and Rome, our travelling bug was firmly established by now. Bronek was transferred from his post in the 5th Brigade to a similar one in the newly formed Brigade of Guards, near Naples. Meanwhile I resumed my interrupted studies at the Bologna University despite fierce protest from my Canteen Company Commandant. It was a most surprising attack as there was an official arrangement between the Polish authorities and the Italian Ministry of Higher Education to facilitate the studies, after all the war was over. We all managed to learn the Italian language pretty quickly and in those several months we even passed a few exams.

I often visited Bronek at his new place near Naples. It was a very good starting point to many excursions, such as Pompei, Vesuvio, Capri, Salerno and Amalfi. We even managed to spend some of our holidays in famous Sorrento. Here in Italy at long last, the first letters from home began to arrive.

From our family, only Witek, a cousin in the Soviet Army

was missing, killed at Lenino. My father and Dana were safe at home in Bialystok and they were all delighted by my marriage and sent their good wishes hoping to see both of us back home soon. Also there we heard for the first time of the inhuman treatment by the Gestapo of the poor people in the concentration camps - Oswiecim (Aushwitz), Majdanek, Belsen and many others. We could hardly believe the horrific treatment of innocent victims by the Germans. The liquidation of the Jews filled us with revulsion. Much later the information of the Katyn massacre added to the growing horrors of these six years of the Second World War. We considered ourselves extremely lucky to have survived this holocaust as many of my Jewish school friends had died in the gas chambers. I vowed there and then never to condemn a human being on the basis of the colour of their skins, race or religion. We also learned of the collapse of the Warsaw uprising when the city was razed to the ground, the population decimated and the supposedly Allied Soviet Army calmly watching it all from the other bank of the River Wisla (Vistula) flowing through the middle of our Capital City bleeding a slow death.

At this time our own political future was decided. The whole Army was to go to England. The civilian families from India and Africa were to join us in due course so Broniek, with his Brigade left at the beginning of September, and I with the other girls followed from Naples on the 13th Sept. The nine day cruise, (which to us seemed like one) over the sunny Mediterranean, then the stormy Atlantic to Glasgow, shrouded in mist. There was no fear of submarines, no black-out, good food, friendly officers and dances on board. What could be better?

The nagging thought of the future was always at the back of our minds, the political situation did not look good as further information of the fate of many friends and generally of other people was coming to the surface. The behaviour of the Germans inflamed by the maniac Hitler, shared by so many millions of his followers, was totally condemned by all nations, but the other villains the Russians were not so. The politicians were so careful not to hurt the feelings of this powerful ally that on the celebration of VE Day, no Polish representative was invited.

As we observed ourselves, the ordinary plain Russian person is fundamentally kind, compassionate and nice, only very misguided and increasingly brain-washed. Their leaders are quite the opposite. At their command their army invaded in 1939, then stood watching the destruction of Warsaw in 1944.

They would not admit to and soldiers in Katyn of their country. This almost all Western people. In defence of the Russians again that they were a past and later by their followed Hitler to the

Still being in the again I had to interrupt only a few exams away did not want to be separated for living and I left to join him somewhere had been there before exotic (for me at least one had to wear stockings street by street and you every street corner, but disembarked in Glasgow transit camp at Maghull. Here I quickly located the next day he came at Barrow-in-Furness, or in the flimsy barracks

Everything was rather general was often awful gravy as the only course send me outside, double only palatable food was fish and chips. This The severe winter of 19 In June that year Kryst headed wild rose, pretty today but her eyes have

Our troops were of return to Poland were if return as they were else life in a strange country Many others decided to with Western ideas and Poland. It was simply or at least close observe "Capitalist West". Mar Argentina or Australia.

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They would not admit to the murder of 14,000 Polish Officers and soldiers in Katyn in 1940 a year before the German invasion of their country. This fact is conveniently forgotten by almost all Western politicians, especially the left wingers. In defence of the Russian people it is only fair to repeat again that they were always oppressed by their Tzars in the past and later by their Commissars, but the Germans willingly followed Hitler to the end.

Still being in the Army we had to follow orders and once again I had to interrupt my studies in Bologna, although being only a few exams away from graduation, but at the same time I did not want to be separated from Bronek, now my main reason for living and I left sunny Italy on the boat already mentioned to join him somewhere in a remote country - England. Bronek had been there before and had told me strange tales of this exotic (for me at least) country, where the weather was cool: one had to wear stockings all year round, houses were identical, street by street and you could eat fish and chips on almost every street corner, but what was fish and chips anyway? We disembarked in Glasgow and after a night-long train journey a transit camp at Maghull near Liverpool was our destination. Here I quickly located Bronek by 'phone in his new place and the next day he came and took me to his new Headquarters in Barrow-in-Furness, or rather a fort on Walney Island. Life in the flimsy barracks was far from luxurious.

Everything was rationed, fuel, bread, and the food in general was often awful. The sight of boiled potatoes with gravy as the only course in the Officer's Mess was enough to send me outside, double quick. I was literally starving. The only palatable food was served in the local cinema's restaurant: fish and chips. This saved me and the child I was expecting. The severe winter of 1947 was very bad but even winters pass. In June that year Krystina was born. A bright blue-eyed, blonde headed wild rose, pretty beyond belief. She is like that today but her eyes have changed colour to hazel, like mine.

Our troops were offered two choices, those who wished to return to Poland were free to go. My two Uncles decided to return as they were elderly and not prepared to start a new life in a strange country and both had wives waiting for them. Many others decided to stay, especially the Officers "tainted" with Western ideas and not very welcome in Stalin dominated Poland. It was simply not safe to go back as severe punishment or at least close observation was awaiting all those from the "Capitalist West". Many emigrated to America, Canada, Argentina or Australia. For those in Great Britain the first

two years were designed to learn new skills, trades and generally to adapt ourselves to a new way of life. After those two years all were demobilised, resettled and left to fend for ourselves, in other words fight for survival. At first only menial jobs were available, down the mines or quarries, transport etc. or in factories with much union opposition. Gradually absorbed by the "natives" those who could, changed for something better. Most of us saved and scraped to buy our own homes trying not to depend too much on charity or council help. Some people adapted better than others trying not to be a burden to a country which offered us a chance not to go back under Stalin's boot, also England was trying to repay us a little for the Yalta betrayal. Life in post-war Poland was very difficult.

The dominance of Russian overlords was very much in evidence there also in other Eastern European countries, like Rumania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, also in the small Baltic states, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. They were all swallowed by the giant Bear. If Mr. Churchill and Mr. Roosevelt had known at the right time never to trust Stalin, today's balance of power would be different. I still count myself lucky to live here in Manchester where we bought our house. Bronek found a job and I stayed at home looking after Krysia and one or two of our single homeless friends. Several years later our second daughter Hania was born, the exact replica of Krysia but with the passing years her looks changed to resemble Bronek. In 1960 I too got a job to help with the rising cost of living and to provide a few luxuries for the family. The girls grew up, completed their studies: Krysia a teacher, Hania her Librarianship. Both are married now, Krysia has two lovely daughters of her own and a very nice husband and his family. Hania has no family yet but a loving husband.

After 36 years of a happy marriage Bronek died four years ago. I now live in a small bungalow on my own waiting for the time to join him.

It is now 1987.

After a long and crippling illness I am back at home. There are so many things to enjoy! Every sunny day is greatly appreciated, lovely flowers, lovingly planted by my kind friends and neighbours but above all the arrival last year of Hania and Brian's son, Thomas, brings me most joy and happiness.

So many good things to tell Bronek ...