

THE ICE ROAD

by Stefan Waydenfeld

Interview with the Author

Alice Faintich interviewed the author, her father, about his reasons for writing *The Ice Road* and various issues pertaining to the book.

Many people have asked me why you waited until 1999 to publish the first edition of this book. Why did you wait for more than sixty years before telling your story?

In the 1940s and early 1950s, the Soviet government engaged in a cover-up about its treatment of Polish prisoners and deportees during World War II. As a result, expatriate Poles were unpopular in the West and viewed as intruders causing problems by asking awkward questions, for example, who was responsible for the Katyń Forest massacre. Back then, nobody wanted to know, the wartime propaganda machine having promoted the Soviet allies. We were considered liars and Stalin was seen as good old Uncle Joe. It wasn't until some years after Stalin's death that the truth started to emerge and people were finally receptive to hearing it.

I'm impressed by the detail of your recollections. Were you able to keep a journal during this time?

No, I did not keep a journal while in the Soviet Union. I did, however, start making notes about my experiences some 15 years later, when I had already settled in England. I left these untouched until my retirement, when I began to write *The Ice Road*.

What made you decide to go ahead and try to get your manuscript published rather than simply writing memoirs for the family?

Originally that was exactly what I had planned. You used to like my stories when you were growing up, and I figured your boys might one day be interested in their family history. After I retired, I started attending a

class on autobiography writing. We had an amazingly diverse and interesting group of people with many stories to tell. They and our teacher were extremely encouraging, and the consensus being that as this aspect of the history of World War II was largely unknown in the West, I might try to get my story published. There was so little out there about the persecution of Poles by the Soviet régime that I thought it might add something useful to the literature. And perhaps it has. I've received many letters from readers since the first edition was published in 1999, and most of them asked the same question: why had we not heard about all this before?

Returning to your story, I can't imagine letting my sons go off on their own to fight in a war at the age of fourteen, though I guess it's different when your country has been invaded. How come your mother let you leave home in September 1939?

The day before I left, a government spokesman had issued a call on the radio for all men capable of bearing arms to go east where a new front line was to be established on the Narew and Bug rivers. Thousands of young and not so young people answered this call to arms. It was our patriotic duty. The necessary supplies were expected to come from England and France through Black Sea ports in Romania, our ally. Also on September 16, the French and British were supposed to start an offensive on the western front—as they were obligated to do by the terms of the Franco-Polish pact—which would have relieved the German pressure on Poland, but this never happened. I was strong and considered myself capable of bearing arms. Also the friends I was leaving with were a year or two older than I and had already undergone some military training in the Przysposobienie Wojskowe, a kind of school-based cadet corps that began in grade 4, which I would have started that month under normal circumstances.

In addition the Germans were expected to occupy our area in a few days' time, and I think my mother had her suspicions of what might happen to young men under a German occupation. Also she was sending me to my father, whom I was supposed to find at the garrison hospital in the fortress of Brest-Litovsk, about 100 miles away.

The number of coincidences is amazing, for example, your mother showing up just as you and your father were to try to get back to Otwock from Brest-Litovsk. Do you ever think about the “what ifs”? Do you ever think about what might have happened if you’d gone back to Poland behind German lines instead of ending up in the Soviet Union?

In this particular case, our family would have been split, this being a tragedy in itself. Mother might have been deported to Siberia on her own, and her survival would have been doubtful. Father and I would soon have been removed from our home in Otwock to a ghetto and eventually to an extermination camp. It would have taken a miracle for either of us to survive. The coincidences saved our lives, as, most likely, did our deportation to Siberia, even though this was not the Soviet authorities’ intent. History can play strange tricks on individuals.

How do you think your experience changed you?

It made me grow up quickly. In our camp in Persia, I heard somebody refer to me as “that older man.” I was seventeen! I have no doubt my experience influenced my character and my approach to life. It made me self-reliant and made me believe that a person could potentially do anything if he or she tried hard enough, and this became my motto in life. My wife has always appreciated that I will turn my hand to anything, whether it’s building closets, mending my clothes (and hers!), and cooking. I also think that early on I developed a facility for lateral thinking, which served me well both in my professional life and in various pursuits. Finally, the experience reinforced my feeling that relying on the intercession of any authority, whether secular or spiritual, is pointless, and that relying on yourself is your only option.

Your parents seemed extremely well prepared, adaptable, and optimistic. They always seemed to have a plan for survival. How did they do this?

My parents cared greatly for each other and for me, and being united gave them strength. Plus my parents had lived through tsarist rule, through World War I, and through the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in

Russia, and thus had experience of hardships: of shortages of everything now considered essential for everyday life, of plagues of lice and bedbugs, of epidemics and other dangers, of the vast morass of Russian bureaucracy and how to deal with it or circumvent it. They certainly did not rely on any kind of spiritual or religious beliefs to help them survive. If they had ever had any religious beliefs, this was enough to lose them. I grew up with none. Under conditions such as we experienced, people soon realized they would perish unless they helped each other, and for the most part, they did. Also my father's profession was respected (see, for example, the section where our settlement's militiaman begged for his help when his daughter was ill). Plus people turned their former knowledge to whatever practical use they could, for instance, my mother's knowledge of biology prevented scurvy in our settlement (she extracted vitamin C from the new growth of fir trees), and we had not a single case of this nasty disease.

Continuing with the survival aspect, the deportees had no idea they were going to end up in Siberia, so how did they manage to find sufficient warm clothing to survive the cold?

We were taken from Poland, where winters were also quite severe (though not on the Siberian scale), particularly the winter of 1939–40, so we did own some warm clothing that we took with us. In Siberia there was no way of acquiring anything: the settlement was too isolated to have access to a flea market or anything else, and in any case, the Soviet Union was starved of consumer goods. In severe weather people just piled on whatever clothes they had in layers, sometimes interleaved with newspaper. People working on tree felling in the forest had to strip the trunks of branches and bark, had to burn these on the spot, and could warm themselves near the fire during breaks. Frostbite, particularly of the fingers and toes, was common, and we treated it by rubbing the affected area with snow. Some deportees received parcels from relatives and friends containing food and warm clothing.

Russian workers wore cotton trousers and jackets padded with kapok (a kind of fibre) and felt boots, but these were not available to us and were a source of great envy. They had no spares, so one could not even exchange them for something else.

You and mother carried on your courtship by letter for many years. Those letters could be a whole book in themselves. Where are they?

We wrote to each other virtually every day. We must have exchanged easily 1,800 letters. Unfortunately, they have all been lost. We were leading a nomadic existence, carrying all we owned on our backs. Your mother had to let go of my letters, as she was not able to carry them and her belongings on her travels through the Middle East, Italy, and finally various locations in England. I managed to hold on to them while in the army, and after the war deposited them in an ammunition box in the basement of my uncle's house on the outskirts of Paris, but they were lost when he moved house. We greatly regret the loss, both for sentimental and historical reasons.