THE ICE ROAD

An Epic Journey from the Stalinist Labor Camps to Freedom

by Stefan Waydenfeld
For Alice, Alexander and Ian.
With infinite love and gratitude to Danuta
in the year of our Golden Wedding Anniversary.
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I wish to express gratitude to my wife, Danuta, for her great patience in reading, re-reading and correcting the manuscript, as well as for her devoted help and encouragement, without which the book would never have been completed.

I am also indebted to relatives, some of whom could have told a similar tale, and to friends for their comments, to June Evans for her assistance with some maps and her drawings and to Anthony Masters for his helpful words and his faith in me. Last but not least I wish to acknowledge with thanks the invaluable help and advice I have received from Sonia Ribeiro of the Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute and to the Polonia Aid Foundation Trust for their generous financial donation.
MOST PEOPLE in Britain and America cherish a simple view of the Second World War in Europe. They remember a struggle of Good against Evil, where the Allied powers gained a famous victory over the malign forces of fascism. Stories of survivors and heroic adventurers are all concerned with people who pitted their wits against the fascist enemy. Such, after all, was the Western experience. Yet it is a view of the war which ignores events in the larger, eastern half of Europe. There, in the East, the scale of the fighting was much larger and the ideological struggle more ruthless. Individuals did not count. Millions of Europeans were faced not with one totalitarian enemy, but with two. They saw their homelands invaded and destroyed by Stalin’s communists as well as by Hitler’s Nazis. In the case of the Poles, they saw their country overrun first by Hitler and Stalin acting in unison, then by Hitler’s legions triumphant over Stalin and finally by a resurgent Red Army victorious over the Nazis. To survive in the successive waves of that maelstrom required rather more complicated strategies than anything encountered in Western Europe.

The memoirs of Stefan Waydenfeld, therefore, grip the imagination not only as a stirring tale of human endurance, but also as an illustration of wartime conditions in very unfamiliar parts of Europe. Born near Warsaw in 1925, he witnessed the brutal German onslaught on Poland as a fourteen-year-old boy, hiding from the Stukas and the stormtroopers, swept along in a tide of helpless refugees. Fleeing to the Soviet-occupied East, he embarked on a dangerous and exotic odyssey that took him from Arctic Russia to Central Asia and thence to Persia and Palestine and eventually to service with the British Eighth Army in Italy. On the way, he is able to compare the Nazi and Soviet occupations, to watch the NKVD at work alongside the Gestapo, and to witness the
mass deportations. Forcibly deported to the Arctic, he sees life and death in cattle wagons, in Soviet schools, camps and collective farms. He works on an ice road, escapes by raft towards the White Sea, sails down the Volga on a luxury steamer, sees Stalingrad, crosses a high mountain chain in Kazakhstan and finally leaves Stalin’s paradise by boat on the Caspian. At every stage, he is surrounded by hunger, disease, poverty and political repression.

Dr Waydenfeld has a keen sense of the everyday suffering that underlies great political events. His vivid picture of family solidarity, civilian struggles and raw courage, often in settings of great natural grandeur, throws light on unusual aspects of the Second World War. Above all, it portrays a thrilling adventure, all the more remarkable for being true.

Norman Davies
University of London
November 1998
CHAPTER 1

Before the Havoc

THE TOWN of my childhood was Otwock, pronounced ‘Otvotsk,’ situated some thirty kilometres south of Warsaw. We lived in the middle house of three which stood together in a large, fenced, woodland plot where pine trees kept company with chestnuts and limes, where birch trees towered over acacias.

The villa was only ten or fifteen minutes’ walk from the railway station. You passed quiet, sleepy streets, cobbled or sandy, with paved footpaths planted with trees, and cars were seldom seen. Even much later, in the late 1930s, when I became an expert in such matters, the town—for all its 30,000 inhabitants—could boast of only three taxis and perhaps a dozen private motor cars.

Should you not feel like walking, you could hire a dorożka, a horse-drawn cab, one of the many which waited at the station, the drivers eager for your custom.

You gave the driver our address, Aleja Kościuszki no. 1, and the dorożka deposited you by the wooden gate of the villa. From the gate, a gravelled path with borders filled with flowers took you to the cream-painted clapboard bungalow divided into two flats. We lived in the back flat and the path passed between the bungalow on your left and the large multicoloured flower borders on your right. On a June morning the fragrance of the tree balm mingled with the scent of the flowerbeds and the sweet smell of the freshly scythed lawns.

During my childhood Otwock was a peculiar town, a health resort specialising in the treatment of diseases of the lungs, of which the main one was tuberculosis. In addition to its 30,000 permanent inhabitants and some 10,000 all-year-round patients, its population would be doubled in the summer by holidaymakers coming from the nearby capital city of Warsaw to take the famous Otwock air.
Otwock air was very refreshing. It was said to have a very high ozone content. ‘Here you can breathe,’ were the first words exchanged by holidaymakers getting out of the train in the smoke-filled Otwock railway station. The Otwock soil was sandy, its landscape flat and its wooden houses, villas, boarding houses known as pensions, sanatoria and hospitals were scattered in pine woods. It was the Otwock pine which had been credited with producing ozone in preference to ‘ordinary’ oxygen given off by ‘ordinary’ trees. This fact was discovered by Dr J.M. Geisler* who had become ‘the father of Otwock as the health resort.’

Now, as every chemistry student knows, one molecule of ozone contains three atoms of oxygen, as against two such atoms per molecule of oxygen in ordinary air. This had to be good for patients with diseased lungs who didn’t get sufficient oxygen. Simplistic reasoning? Perhaps, but nevertheless at least some of the Otwock patients got better.

Until the advent of anti-tuberculous drugs after the Second World War, TB was a veritable scourge, comparable to syphilis and leprosy in earlier years. It could affect almost every organ of the body, but in humans it had a special predilection for the lungs. The disease struck mainly young people, but no age group was exempt. It was a serious economic strain on the family and on the state. It had a high mortality rate, but usually the consumptive took a long time dying. For some reason a proportion of the patients survived, and apparently the chances of survival were better in such health resorts as Davos, in Switzerland, and Otwock, in Poland. Of the two, Otwock was much more affordable.

The mainstays of treatment of tuberculosis in Otwock were rest and diet. The Otwock cuisine had a character of its own, its main ingredient was fat: butter, cream, sour cream, eggs, fat poultry, rich soups, cream-laden cakes. Food was meant to be ‘nutritious’; moderate obesity was ‘good’; ‘Sugar makes you stronger’ was the slogan of the day, sanctioned by medical authorities; and ‘The thin man dies before the fat man loses weight,’ was the wisdom of the masses. Cholesterol levels must have been sky-high, but this was still an unrecognised problem. In tuberculosis, progress of the disease was marked by loss of weight, while improvement was heralded by weight gain. A fattening diet seemed, therefore, just the thing.

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My father was a physician who specialised in the treatment of tuberculosis in children and young adults. He was a warm, compassionate man, popular with patients of all ages. Over the years he had built up a large practice. He saw patients in his office in our house from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. and from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m., Monday to Saturday, and in the mornings only on Sunday. Between the end of the morning session and the family lunch, served at 3 p.m., he made his home visits.

My earliest memory of family life was the daily dinner. We would all sit round the table, Father, Mother, my older brother, Jurek, I and whoever else happened to be staying in our hospitable home. After dessert, Father would half-stand. ‘Who is going to tuck me in today?’ he would ask. Without waiting for the volunteer, he would count us out pointing to each diner in turn: eeny, meeny, miny, mo (the Polish ditty was entliczek, pętliczek, czerwony stoliczek, equally mysterious as its English equivalent). Somehow the ‘mo’ always came when his finger pointed at me. I would have been very disappointed if it hadn’t, but this never happened. Affecting surprise, but up in a flash, I would follow Father to my parents’ bedroom. There he would lie down on the sofa and it was my job to cover him with a woollen rug and kiss him on the cheek. An hour later, Olesia, our maid, would call me to the kitchen and hand me a cup of strong black coffee to take to Father. He used to say: ‘Unless I have my coffee, the first patient wastes his money.’ In those days the majority of medical practices were private. In pre-war Poland, the poorer people had access to the centrally funded Kasa Chorych (a network of dispensaries for the poor), and to institutions supported by various Polish and Jewish charities to which doctors gave their time without payment. My father was one of the Kasa Chorych organisers after the First World War.

‘Anyway,’ he would say to me when I was a little older, ‘forty per cent of my patients can’t spare the money for doctors’ fees. Often enough, God knows, I have to give them several złotys for the prescription. Remember, Stefanku, provided that sixty per cent of your patients pay your bills, you make a comfortable living.’ I loved my father. I always wanted to follow in his footsteps. In fact, it had never occurred to me to be anything but a doctor.

When I was about five or six, we moved to the ground-floor flat of another house on the same private estate. The flat was much bigger and I had a room of my own, next to my brother’s. I don’t remember much about the flat, except that in the winter my brother and I played football...
in the long corridor and that once a week, usually on Friday, a big fish—
either a pike or a carp—swam in the bath, awaiting execution. Later in
the day Olesia would chop its head off and the headless body would jump
about on the kitchen table. I used to watch the execution with fascina-
tion. Once, my brother, who usually avoided the kitchen, saw the head-
less body dance on the floor and vowed never, ever to eat fish again.

In the spring of 1936, before my eleventh birthday, we moved a couple
of hundred yards up the street to our newly built house at Aleja
Kościuszki no. 6a, at the corner of Szopena Street. My father had bought
the plot of land a year or two earlier after a fire had destroyed the
wooden villa; the blackened timbers still showed through the under-
growth. The plot was half a morga (about four-fifths of an acre) in size
and, when finished, our house was the most modern and the most
spacious private villa in Otwock. It had eleven rooms on two levels,
including my father’s surgery, the waiting room, and Mother’s bacterio-
logical laboratory. At the back of the house there was a conservatory,
its walls consisting of large glass panels which were removed for the
summer, and its flat roof served as the first-floor terrace.

The plot had a little history associated with it. In the earlier part of
the century the original house was a pension and one of the holidaymak-
ers spending the summer of 1915 there was Józef Piłsudski. Piłsudski
later became the liberator of Poland and its prime minister; then its
benevolent dictator, idol and national hero. When he had bought the plot,
Father offered a corner of it to the town council for a Piłsudski monu-
ment. The monument had been ceremoniously unveiled on 11 November
1938, Independence Day. It was a rough granite obelisk, over two metres
high, with a bas-relief of Marshal Piłsudski’s head and a carved inscrip-
tion. From then on all national celebrations were supposed to take
place in front of our house, but we were away when the first parade
took place on 3 May 1939, and then the war started and there were no
more celebrations.

There was another monument in Otwock and that was the monument
of Kościuszko, an eighteenth-century Polish national hero and a general
of the American Revolutionary Army. It comprised a cream-coloured
pedestal with a bust of the great man. The two monuments had a
chequered history. During the Second World War; when Poland was
under German occupation, the Kościuszko statue was blown up by the
Germans in retaliation for the destruction by the Resistance of some

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Nazi emblems in front of the local German police authority. The Piłsudski monument survived the war, but when I visited Otwock in the early 1960s—by which time Poland was a Soviet satellite—it lay on its side, overgrown and neglected. On my subsequent visits to Otwock in the 1970s and 1980s, it was nowhere to be seen; mysteriously, the obelisk had disappeared. In the early 1990s, when Poland once more regained its independence, the monument reappeared in its rightful place.

My mother had a degree in biology, or natural sciences as it used to be called, and she specialised in medical bacteriology and clinical pathology. For many years she worked in the State Institute of Hygiene in Warsaw, but in the new house she ran her own clinico-bacteriological laboratory. The room was full of wonders: there were instruments made of brass and stainless steel, glassware in all shapes and sizes and bottles labelled ‘poison.’ By the age of eleven, I was—at least in my own eyes—an expert operator of the microscope, the polarimeter, the centrifuge and the steriliser. I spent hours enthralled by the microscope, examining drops of water, my own blood and my mother’s preparations of various cocci and bacilli, stained different colours. In contrast, Father’s X-ray equipment, which was the first in private hands in Otwock and had moved with us from the old house, remained forever taboo.

The land around the villa had rapidly become a much-cherished garden, lovingly tended by my parents and by Antoni, our gardener-cum-coachman. Antoni, his wife, who helped with the housework, and their small daughter lived in the lodge that Father had built at the back of the garden. Next to the lodge was the stable which housed our pale chestnut horse, whose job it was to take Father on his rounds all over the town and sometimes to outlying estates, villas and pensions in our bryczka (an open carriage). On Sundays and during school holidays I would accompany Father; and sometimes Antoni would give me the reins. Occasionally, we would leave Antoni behind and I would take my father on his rounds.

There was one part of Otwock which was very different from the rest. This was miasteczko, or little town, the poor Jewish quarter on the west side of the railway line, separated from it by a large, open, market area. Narrow streets, which were sandy, or at best cobbled, led to the noisy and smelly area, with its semi-derelict houses which were terribly overcrowded, crooked walls and very little vegetation, only an occasional stunted tree. Here people talked in Yiddish, which I did not understand,
or in heavily accented Polish. They were very friendly to us and held Father in high esteem. Most of his patients who could not and did not pay their bills lived here. Under the German occupation the area became the Otwock Jewish ghetto and almost all its inhabitants were murdered by the Nazis.

I always had a book to read while waiting for my father outside the patient’s house, but when it was Antoni driving, and should he be in the mood, instead of reading I would listen entranced to Antoni’s often funny and sometimes scary stories. They were crowded with saints, devils, ghosts, all kinds of supernatural creatures, and full of very vividly described facts of life.

At the time schools didn’t provide sex education. Also, generally speaking, my parents’ generation were either unwilling or could not bring themselves to talk to their children about matters of sex. The subject was taboo. Not among adults, of course, but *pas devant les enfants*. Consequently, I had to supplement my sex education, as provided by Antoni, by my own efforts.

I soon discovered that in the evenings when my parents and Jurek were out and Olesia was totally wrapped up in a trashy novel in her kitchen alcove, I could sneak into my father’s office and have the run of his library. Left on my own, I would be engrossed in *Vita Sexualis*, or some such book. The title was often in Latin but the text was in Polish and the language of the drawings was, of course, universal. The text was neither as explicit nor as colourful as Antoni’s ‘lessons’ but, in a way, it was easier to understand; it made more sense to me.

In late 1936 the situation became a little easier when Olesia acquired a boyfriend, a local policeman, who absorbed her attention even more completely than her trashy novels had previously done.

Also by then, Jurek, my brother, had been sent to university abroad and this left me with the run of the house.

Jurek, diminutive for Jerzy, the Polish equivalent of George, was six years older than me and, apart from having the same parents, we did not have much in common. When I was little Jurek was very protective of me, but later I often felt his heavy hand when nobody was looking. I was certainly not an angel, so perhaps I deserved it.

It would probably be true to say that while I was Father’s favourite, Jurek was Mother’s. This fairly usual problem was magnified by our complicated family circumstances.
My father was born in 1890 in Płock, while my mother was born in 1889 in Mława. At that time Poland did not exist as an independent country and the part of Poland where they had lived was reigned over by the Tsar of Russia. Father had obtained his medical degree in Moscow in 1914, at the start of the First World War, and was almost immediately drafted into the Russian Army. Holding the rank of shtabs-kapitan (junior captain), he served as the medical officer for an artillery division. Mother studied natural sciences at the University of Warsaw which, because of the war, had been evacuated to Kharkov, in the Ukraine. My parents met at university and were married in 1915. In 1917, at the time of the Russian Revolution, they escaped back to Poland.

The country soon regained its independence and my father joined the Polish Army. It was the time of the Polish–Bolshevik war and my father stayed in the army until 1922.

Jurek was born on 2 June 1919, and consequently, for the first three years of his life, he had known Father only as somebody who periodically invaded his home and displaced him for a day or two as the centre of Mother’s attention. Not surprisingly, Father’s relationship with Jurek had never been good.

After my father’s demobilisation, my parents settled in Łódź, a big industrial town west of Warsaw. There my father contracted—probably from a patient—tuberculosis of the larynx. There was no real prospect of a cure. On the advice of his superiors Father went to Berlin, where some bold surgeons had tried to eradicate the disease by excision or cauterisation of the diseased tissue, but the price of this experimental treatment was the loss of voice. There, while already strapped in the chair, he changed his mind and decided on a more conservative treatment.

So my parents moved to Otwock, where my father became a patient. To give his larynx a complete rest he did not speak for two years. He spent his days in a deckchair, wrapped in a rug. He was forever writing notes to Mother and he read voraciously; hence our enormous library, most of which gathered dust in the loft. In 1924, after two years of this treatment, he went to Berlin once more. The check-up revealed no trace of the disease, and until the Second World War Father had no serious health problems.

Due to the need to keep Jurek away from Father because of the fear of contagion, my brother had only minimal ‘paternal care.’ Also, soon after Father’s recovery, the situation was further complicated by my
arrival in 1925, and the inevitable shift of our parents’ attention. It was all very unsatisfactory from poor Jurek’s point of view.

Jurek obtained his *matura*, or high-school certificate, in 1935 at the young age of sixteen, instead of the more usual eighteen. There was no doubt that the next step would be university—in our social circle a university degree was *de rigueur*. Father wanted Jurek to study medicine, but this very fact was enough to put Jurek off. He enrolled at Warsaw University, in the Department of Mathematics. One day, in the winter, he returned home much earlier than usual and had a heated discussion with Father behind locked doors.

Later the same day Father called me to his study. ‘Jurek is adamant that he is not going back to Warsaw University. Members of the right-wing students’ association blocked the university’s entrance to those of Semitic appearance. They did not stop him, but some of his friends were told to go to the left side of the lecture theatre. “Left side for the leftists, communists and Jews,” they shouted. Jurek’s friends refused to give in and to avoid a fight they left the lecture hall. He left in sympathy.’

Father stopped, sighed deeply, got up and turned to the window with his back to me. ‘You know,’ he continued, ‘what is happening in Germany. I have noticed that you have become an avid newspaper reader. Good. Good. It’s getting very depressing, isn’t it? Not what we fought for in the war: No, not at all. It looks as if our nationalists want to follow in the footsteps of Hitler and his Brown Shirts. I am going to send Jurek abroad, maybe to England or France. I don’t know where and how yet. He wants to study industrial chemistry, he also mentioned shipbuilding in Italy, but he must make up his own mind. Aunt Lola has been living in Paris for some ten years now. She has been writing about the situation to Mother and she has offered to have Jurek to stay. I don’t know. I would have to find a way of sending money abroad to him and there are restrictions in place.’ He stopped and returned to his chair. His usually kind face was now stern, his brows knitted tightly together in concentration, his lips—drawn to two thin lines—had almost disappeared. Then he relaxed, lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

‘As soon as Jurek has gone,’ he said, ‘we will have to start thinking about you, Stefanku. It may be wise for you too to go to a boarding school abroad as soon as you get your *gimnazjum* [secondary school] certificate. Now, let me see...that will be in 1940, won’t it? You will be only fifteen. Mother won’t like it. We shall see. I hope peace will last that long.
A pity that they don’t teach you English at the gimnazjum. You must work hard on your French, but you do that anyway, don’t you?” It wasn’t that I was working particularly hard, I just did well at school without too much effort.

In September 1936, soon after Jurek’s departure abroad, I entered the first form of the Otwock gimnazjum. Father’s calculation was right: four years at the gimnazjum would take me to 1940. Then two years at the lyceum (college) and in September 1942, at the age of seventeen, I should get my matura and be ready to enrol at a university—faculty of medicine, of course.

The next three years were as idyllic as one could wish. Or perhaps they became so in retrospect. We continued to live well. As far as I knew my parents had no financial worries; ours was a prosperous middle-class life. Except for their short trips abroad once a year, my parents were always there for me. Olesia, our maid of many years’ standing, was there and Antoni and his wife were there.

For me, the highlight of those years was a cruise in May 1939. It was my first ever trip abroad. After much deliberation my parents narrowed the choice to one of the two Polish sister ships, luxury liners. Piłsudski was going in May to the ‘southern sun,’ while Batory was scheduled to go in August to New York for the World Exhibition. As August was my father’s busiest month in his practice, we went in May to the southern sun. My teachers saw no reason why I should not be given an opportunity to broaden my mind by travel and agreed to give me a month’s leave from school. The fact that ours was a private school and that my father was our school doctor probably helped. It was all very exciting.

We left from Gdynia and went through the Kiel Canal into the North Sea, then through the English Channel and the Straits of Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean. We visited Lisbon, Naples, Palermo, Tripoli and Ceuta. We returned to Gdynia towards the end of May. The trip was the greatest adventure of my childhood. It made me a seasoned traveller, at least in Otwock. Nobody I knew, even among the adults, had had a similar experience.

One interesting point: should my parents have opted for the New York cruise, our lives would have taken a very different path. The liner Batory was still in New York when the war started. The passengers spent
the war in the USA and most of them settled there permanently after the war.

I am not sure where to place the end of my childhood. On 18 June 1939 I felt very grown up; it was my fourteenth birthday and instead of arranging yet another children’s party, my parents took me to the theatre. I was no stranger to the theatre, because although there was no permanent theatre in Otwock, the centre of Warsaw with its many excellent theatres—Wielki, Polski, Mały, Letni and Kameralny among them—was only half an hour away, and was easily reached by frequent and comfortable electric trains. About once a month I went to a matinée either with my mother, or with one of my many aunts, or with the school. Warsaw theatres had about half-a-dozen special performances for schools during the academic year. We saw all kinds of classical and modern plays by Polish and foreign playwrights.

On this particular day we were not going to any old theatre; we were going to the AliBaba, a review theatre, a kind of sophisticated music hall. Also, it was to be the evening performance. I became very impatient when, in my judgement, it was time to start on our way. Antoni was not yet ready to take us to the station. What was happening? At my most debonair, I had been ready and waiting for over an hour. I wore my white woollen trousers, a white shirt, a blue silk tie and my new navy-blue school blazer. I felt really grown up. But we were running late, very late. I could not stand the suspense any longer so I ran to the lodge and found Antoni in the stable grooming the horse. A cigarette hung unlit from his lip—Kasztan (the chestnut) did not like smoke.

‘We are going to miss the train! We are late! We will be late for the theatre!’

‘I ain’t going nowhere,’ Antoni shrugged his shoulders. ‘I haven’t been told nothing.’ His shoulders popped up and down again.

I ran back to the house. I was making for the stairs and my parents’ bedroom when an unexpected sight caught my eye. Olesia was holding the wide, heavy oak front door open and there, outside the gate, was a car. I knew that car; I had travelled in it before. It was the dark-green Buick limousine belonging to my parents’ friends, the Skotnickis. Mr Skotnicki was at the wheel and his wife was in the passenger seat. To me a car, any car, had been an object of long-suppressed envy. Father could
afford a car, but he did not want to own one. ‘Jurek will break his neck on his first trip back,’ he would say. And perhaps a motor-car was not a practical means of travel on the cobbled or sandy streets of Otwock.

I looked up. My parents—Father in his dinner jacket, Mother in a black evening dress—were coming down the stairs. An hour later, with the Skotnickis, we were in the theatre.

The foyer and the street outside the theatre were packed with adults. I looked around and thought how different it was from the matinée. In those days people would dress up for the evening performance. Most men sported either dinner jackets or dark lounge suits, many ladies wore long dresses. A boy standing near me was also wearing a school blazer; but the red school badge on his left sleeve and the thin red trimmings on his blazer cuffs indicated a lyceum (equivalent of the last two years of secondary school) pupil. He was thus at least two or three years older than me. He was also much taller than me and he was arm in arm with a slim brunette. Perhaps in two or three years that might be me.

The bell sounded and we went to our seats in the stalls. The AliBaba had only a small auditorium, but it was the most renowned of the Warsaw review theatres. The current review was called Orzel czy Rzeszka. It was a mixture of satirical poems, political sketches, jokes by the famous compère, Krukowski, bits of music, risqué playlets and cabaret. I still remember the look of surprise on my mother’s face when I had no problem in understanding the most risqué jokes, innuendoes and situations. Even the title of the review was a double entendre: the Polish meant ‘Head or Tails,’ but the addition of one letter changed the meaning to ‘Polish Eagle or The Reich.’

After the theatre we went to the Bristol Hotel restaurant for my first late-night meal out. A liveried doorman opened the door of the Buick. I remember that the night was warm, the sky studded with stars.

The light-blue dining room was crowded. People, many in dinner jackets, sat at tables that were covered with white starched tablecloths and they were waited upon by other men in dinner jackets, distinguishable from the diners only by the fact that they moved about very quickly. Two waiters guided us to a table and held the chairs out first for the ladies, then for the men and lastly for me. One of them took our orders, another brought the list of vodkas and wines.

I felt like an adult and was being treated as such. Having been a regular reader of daily newspapers, I was up to taking part in serious
conversation. Or maybe I was allowed to have my say out of kindness to
the birthday boy—but I was given only one vodka.

This was a time of rapidly increasing tension in Europe. Neither
my parents nor their friends doubted that the war was just around the
corner. ‘But we have a non-aggression treaty with Germany,’ I objected.
‘Don’t we?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr Skotnicki, ‘but treaties have never yet stopped them
from attacking their neighbours at the time of their choosing.’

Father was more optimistic. ‘With France and now also England on
our side,’ he said, referring to the recent English guarantee of Polish
frontiers, ‘we ought to be all right, even if they do attack.’

‘What about the Russians?’ said Mother.

‘We also have a non-aggression treaty with them,’ I said. ‘We were
discussing it at school last week during the Latin lesson. *Pacta servanda
sunt*, and all that . . . *Coniugatio periphrastica passiva,*’ I added for no
obvious reason. Conscious of showing off, I blushed and laughed at the
same time. It must be the vodka, I thought.

‘It is no laughing matter,’ Mr Skotnicki sternly told me off. ‘Sooner
or later Hitler and Stalin will work hand in hand,’ he prophesied.

Now everybody laughed. ‘Incompatible ideologies. Impossible!’
said Father:

Others agreed: ‘Preposterous . . . Out of the question.’

‘I hope that you are right, but I wouldn’t bet on it,’ said Mr Skotnicki.

I was puzzled by what Mr Skotnicki was saying and by the vehemence
with which he said it. He was well connected in Warsaw, he had friends
in government circles, perhaps he knew something the others didn’t.
But it was all so different from what the papers were saying:
*OUR CAVALRY SHALL REACH BERLIN . . . WE SHALL WATER OUR
HORSES IN THE RIVER SPREE.* I was mystified.
THE BANG on the door came on 29 June 1940. I had been fast asleep. The green phosphorescent hands of my watch showed 3 a.m. We had been expecting it. In a way, it was a relief when it came. As I reached the door in my pyjamas, my parents, in their dressing-gowns, were already there.

There were three of them on the doorstep. No introduction was needed. In improvised uniforms of different shapes and hues, in military-style blue peaked caps, with rifles nonchalantly slung from their shoulders and with red bands on their left sleeves, they were unmistakably the citizens’ militia.

‘Family Wajdenfeld,’ shouted the one who seemed to be in charge; short and fat. ‘Three of you. We have orders to search your flat. Wait in the kitchen. You, Yakov,’ he pointed to a much younger man, tall and thin, ‘keep an eye on them. No talking,’ he added, and then, ‘Yegor, come with me.’ He turned round, noticed our landlady, Mrs Margulis, at the top of the stairs. ‘Nothing to do with you!’ he shouted waving her away. ‘Back to bed!’

They spoke briefly among themselves. And then the fat one addressed us again: ‘After the search, get dressed and I’ll give you thirty minutes to pack your belongings.’ From the distance of about ten feet he allowed Father a glimpse of a piece of paper. ‘The search warrant,’ he barked and almost immediately replaced the supposed document in his trouser pocket. But no papers were necessary. Their threatening demeanour, their official red armbands and, most of all, their rifles were incentive enough for my parents to comply.

They spoke a kind of broken Russian and pretended that they knew no Polish. As Pińsk was now part of the Belorussian Soviet Republic they ought to have been speaking Belorussian but, like most town people in this former part of Poland, they did not know this peasant dialect.
The deportation order based on the orders of the NKVD, dated 6 April 1940

CERTIFICATE

Based on the directives of the NKVD of the USSR and directives of the National Committee of Internal Affairs of the Belorussian SSR of 6/iv/1940 no. 1/1767 Weidenfeld Wolf, Władysław, Mosheevich born 1890, residing in the city of Pińsk in Pińsk district was deported on the orders of the NKVD Administration for Pińsk District as a refugee from former Poland, not annexed by Germany.

DEPUTY HEAD OF THE PIŃSK DISTRICT UKRAINIAN NKVD

Captain of State Security Fukin
SEARCH REPORT

29th June 1940, Pińsk

I, P.V. Zhydko, an inspector of the AKHO Ukrainian NKVD in Pińsk District, carried out a search in the presence of an RKM worker Comrade G. N. Kozak and a housewife Citizen Brokha Fāiveleva Margolin. I carried out a search of the flat of Citizen Wolf, Władysław Moiseyevich Weidenfeld residing at 2, Nekrasov Street. During the search 40 (forty) złotys of Polish silver were discovered: three ten złoty coins and two five złoty coins.

That comprises the report of this search.

AKHO Ukrainian NKVD Inspector [Illegible] Zhydko

Witnesses [Illegible] of the second detachment Kozak

[Illegible] Margolin

Excerpt from THE ICE ROAD © 2005, 2010 Alice Faintich
The leader and Yakov both looked Jewish and spoke with a strong Yiddish accent. They were probably more used to speaking Yiddish than any other language. The third man, Yegor, short and swarthy, was, judging by his accent, a Ukrainian peasant. All three were unshaven and unwashed and, while his two companions looked menacingly more like highwaymen than militiamen, Yakov did not look particularly fierce. And so, as Yakov herded us into the kitchen and closed the kitchen door behind him, Mother engaged him in conversation. ‘Where are you taking us?’ she asked in her excellent Russian.

Yakov did not answer. Instead, he put his finger to his lips. Next, he motioned my parents to sit down and took the third chair himself. After a couple of minutes of silence he got up, pushed the door ajar and for a brief moment stuck his head out. Loud voices of his two companions on a rampage in my parents’ bedroom drifted unintelligibly across the corridor. Reassured, he returned to his chair. Next, obviously searching for unfamiliar words, he started hesitantly in Russian: ‘To the railway station. To your train.’ He paused and continued in excellent Polish. ‘The train to Warsaw. You have registered for repatriation, haven’t you? Thousands of people will be going on the same train. It’s a goods train, but it is only a short journey.’

‘But why in the middle of the night?’ asked Father.

‘We always work at night. Didn’t you know?’ said Yakov with a smile. We sat there in silence. ‘Are you sure that you are doing the right thing? God knows what the Germans will be…’ He stopped in mid-sentence as the door opened and the Ukrainian called for us to return to the bedroom. ‘Start packing. You have thirty minutes,’ he looked at the watch on his wrist. It was the same kind of watch as mine, a Cyma. Or was it my watch? Father saw it too. I was about to say something, but Father’s raised finger shut me up.

Our rooms were in utter disarray, it was as if a whirlwind had passed through, or a band of robbers. But that’s what they were, a band of robbers. They had stolen my watch!

Father and I dressed quickly. Mother did it in the privacy of the kitchen. We packed in a hurry. Originally we had arrived in Pińsk with only two suitcases, now we had additional bags of bedding, kitchen utensils, crockery, books. Hours would be required for proper packing, not thirty minutes. No matter, at last we were going home. Yakov’s doubts added to my fear of the Germans, but I hoped that my parents
knew what they were doing when they registered for repatriation. At least we were not being sent to Siberia. Judging from what I had heard and read, it was a place to keep away from at all costs.

The search over, the militiamen were in a hurry: ‘Davay, davay, po bystreye, move, move, hurry up,’ they were all shouting over the next few minutes.

‘That’s to cover the traces,’ Father murmured in French. ‘They must have stolen a few things.’ My parents had lived through the October 1917 revolution in Russia and they knew ‘the standard procedure.’ And indeed, much later we discovered that, in addition to my watch, a few other valuable items had found their way into the deep pockets of these guardians of the law, among them Mother’s watch, Father’s gold Waterman fountain pen and my Pelican fountain pen: Father’s watch survived in the pocket of his pyjamas; he hid it there as soon as he heard the banging on the door.

Once we finished packing, the demeanour of the militiamen changed. They stopped shouting, they helped us to load our suitcases, bags and boxes onto the horse-drawn cart waiting in the street. We had to return to the house several times to get all the stuff out. Father seemed to behave in an odd way. He went back into the house, then came out empty-handed. He went back again, still he brought nothing out. And then Mrs Margulis came down in a dressing gown clutching to her chest a parcel wrapped in newspaper: ‘I have made a few sandwiches for your journey,’ she stopped suddenly uncertain what to do. ‘Is that all right?’ she asked the nearest militiaman, the Ukrainian. He barred her way with his rifle.

‘What have you got there?’ asked the leader and lifted the edge of the newspaper: ‘Oh, sandwiches,’ he shrugged his shoulders. ‘All right, all right. Let her. Hurry up.’ Father accepted the parcel and kissed Mrs Margulis on both cheeks. A very unusual thing for Father to do, I thought. Then Mother and I said our farewells to her. She was a nice old lady, at least forty. She had prepared a lot of sandwiches for the eight-hour journey to Warsaw, I thought.

‘Let’s sit down,’ said Mrs Margulis and smiled happily. And we sat down on the stairs for a minute, as was the custom.

‘Bourgeois superstition,’ growled the Ukrainian, but the two Jews sat down with us. And then it was ‘Hurry, hurry, move,’ all over again.
Father passed the parcel over to Mother. She just nodded and smiled at Mrs Margulis.

Later in the train, in the ‘privacy’ of our corner, Mother gave Father and me a sandwich each, then removed a packet wrapped in greaseproof paper which looked like more sandwiches and put it in her handbag. ‘What . . . ,’ I started, but with Mother’s finger across her lips, the question remained hanging in the air.

I did not learn the story behind the packet of ‘sandwiches’ until later that night when, stretched next to me ready for sleep, Father whispered it in my ear.

When we had returned to Pińsk from our failed expedition to Brześć, anticipating our deportation, Father had hidden his Polish Army Officer’s Book and his gold cigarette case outside the toilet window, between the leaves of the wooden window shutters. He had hoped that either he or Mother would be able to grab the packet, unseen, at the appropriate moment. Mrs Margulis was admitted to the secret, but I was not. I didn’t blame my parents, I was only fifteen. Also, less than a week before our deportation, Father had exchanged a $100 bill on the black market. This was all the foreign currency he owned. In the USSR, selling and buying foreign currency, even its possession, was, at the time, a capital offence. Indeed, people were being shot for less serious transgressions. The proceeds were also part of that hidden parcel now masquerading as sandwiches. The sum in roubles was enormous. With an exchange rate of roughly 350 roubles per dollar, he now had about 35,000 roubles.

The reason for the exorbitant exchange rate was that the Polish city of Wilno had fallen to the still-independent Lithuania and that via Wilno many refugees managed to escape to Scandinavia, and hence to Great Britain, America and even China. They badly needed foreign currency and the dollar rose to unprecedented heights.

Now, on that memorable night, neither of my parents had managed to get to the parcel unobserved, but our landlady did. She recognised the banging on the door for what it was and, while we were packing, she prepared the sandwiches of buttered bread. She waited for the moment when our flat was empty, removed the hidden parcel and incorporated it into the packet.

I have little doubt that the following year, along with other Jewish inhabitants of Belorussia and Ukraine, Mrs Margulis was murdered by
the Nazis. Equally, I have no doubt that her action on that fateful night in Pińsk secured our survival.

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It was early morning when, sitting in the cart on our bags and suitcases, and escorted by Yegor alone, we started on our way. The eastern side of the sky was turning golden red. Another hot day was upon us. The town was still asleep and the streets were empty except for some stray dogs and a few early risers going about their business. Their furtive glances followed us for a few seconds and then people promptly looked the other way. It was a fifteen-minute journey to the Pińsk railway station and our undernourished chestnut horse was not in a hurry.

In contrast to the town, the station was exceedingly busy. It crawled with militiamen in their shabby improvised uniforms with the red armbands, lorded over by the regular railway police and by the NKVD men, who were instantly recognisable by their blue uniforms with the red stripes down the trousers. Our cart became the eleventh in the queue of horse-drawn vehicles and of small lorries waiting in the street at the gate in the wire-net fencing off the station. The gate was ajar and guards patrolled the long, wide, gravel path between the fence and the train.

A goods train of some forty wagons stretched motionless along the gravel path. There was no locomotive. The wide, sliding doors of the wagons were open. The train was empty. The dirty-red wagons were of the type to be seen in all railway stations. Each wagon had a notice by the door. I couldn’t make out the stencilled Cyrillic letters clearly at the distance, but I knew what they said: forty men or eight horses. I had seen them before in other stations. Now they did not seem funny. Forty men, women and children in a wooden box. I wished I were a horse.

The queue was strangely quiet. The guards did not stop people talking, but we were subdued, intimidated, tired. Scanty gossip was being exchanged sotto voce.

We waited and waited. The queue of vehicles kept growing. Stretched out on top of our possessions, my head in Mother’s lap, I must have fallen asleep. A commotion woke me up. The guards were banging shut the sliding doors of the wagons. As I sat up, a saloon car stopped at the station gate and disgorged several NKVD officers.
The place sprang to life. The guards ran down the queue of vehicles and shouts filled the air: ‘Out, out. Collect your belongings. Hurry. Get moving.’ Within minutes we were out of the carts and lorries and herded into a long queue to the station. The gate was now wide open. An NKVD officer counted out groups of forty. Each group was directed to a wagon and told to wait outside. But, as people found that they could not carry all their belongings in one go, all semblance of order disappeared. Men and women ran to and fro between the vehicles in the street and the train, bumping into each other, mistaking the wagons, yelling in Polish, in Yiddish, in Russian, calling their spouses, their children. While Mother stayed behind guarding the first instalment of our belongings by the assigned wagon, Father and I went back to the cart for the rest of our possessions. Surprisingly, we did not lose anything in the mêlée.

By the time we returned to the train with the remaining items, the door in the middle of the wagon wall had been slid back throwing the box open. But its floor was at least two feet higher than the gravelled path and there were no steps. People were throwing their belongings in and were helping each other up. The door in the opposite wall of the wagon was closed and the central space of the car filled up rapidly with bags and bundles. On each side of the wagon, there were two deep horizontal shelves about one metre apart, the lower one raised about half a metre above the floor. Father helped Mother up. Soon most of the women and children were inside, perching on the edge of the lower and upper shelves, like so many sparrows on telegraph wires, while the central space was littered with luggage of all shapes and sizes.

From his experience in the First World War and in the revolution, Father knew the routine and took charge. ‘Listen,’ he shouted. ‘There are four shelves for forty people, ten per shelf. Let’s do it sensibly. Stay in family groups.’ In the meantime, having stepped up on some suitcases, Mother sat down on the far end of the righthand upper shelf. ‘Everything flat goes under the lower shelves,’ Father continued. ‘Bags of bedding and soft bundles go on your chosen places on the shelves.’ Amazingly, people obeyed and order was restored. Mother had reserved three places for us and I was glad to stretch out along the wall of the wagon, with my head just below a small rectangular window in the wall which was about two hands long and one hand wide, it had no glass, only two rusty vertical bars. Here the ceiling was low and, lying down,
I could touch it with my fingers. Even in early morning the metal was already warm to the touch. Unless we are on our way soon, I thought to myself, we shall be cooked in here.

My window faced the proper, raised, paved platform. All I could see was the end of the station building, an empty field to its side and houses in the distance. An armed militiaman came into view. The platform patrol presumably.

More shouting came from the other side of the train. The words were indistinguishable. And then the door was banged shut, somebody fiddled with the iron bar. We were locked in, but the train did not move.

The noise slowly died down. Hours passed. Even though the day was still young, the occupants of the car, dragged out of their beds in the middle of the night, were tired and subdued. Some were snoring already. By noon the wagon became uncomfortably hot. The only means of ventilation were the barred windows, like the one above my head, one in each corner of the car, and the summer of 1940 was exceptionally hot. But it should be no more than ten or twelve hours’ travel to Warsaw. It wouldn’t be too bad.

Father, stretched out next to me, breathed evenly. Mother, lying next to him, had her eyes shut. Hungry and miserable, I could not sleep. I had to pee. But we were locked in a wagon with no toilet. I sat up on the edge of the shelf, my neck bent, my head just an inch or two from the hot roof. Then I became aware of the smell rising from the floor of the wagon from somewhere near the door. I looked down. Just under my feet, there was a hole in the floor with a short wooden gutter, two planks fixed edge on, at right angles. Was this our lavatory for the day’s journey to Warsaw? For forty people of both sexes? It certainly smelled like it. In towns and railway stations even the public urinals for men were totally enclosed. This contraption was in full view of everybody. The urge became unbearable, my belly hurt. Then the pain eased off and I went to sleep. But the pain woke me up again. It was early afternoon. Children were still asleep but most adults were awake, chatting. Father was awake and I told him about my predicament. By then we had been locked in for some eight hours. He got down from the shelf and banged on the door, but the negotiations with the guard outside conducted through the locked door proved fruitless. By then the ‘toilet’ was already in use, mainly by small children, until somebody had the bright idea of screening it off with a blanket. Instantly there was a queue for it,
children and women first. For the first time in my life I was glad to be still designated a child.

I tried in vain, but I could not do it. I stood inside the blanket screen for several minutes and had to give up. My belly hurt on and off. When the queue disappeared I tried again. Nothing. My father, in both his parental and medical capacity, the provider of cures and comforts, was powerless.

Suddenly, there was a commotion outside, on the station side. Two NKVD men were running along the train shouting: ‘Is there a doctor on the train? We need a doctor.’

In the next instance Father was by the window. ‘I am a doctor,’ he shouted. Did he do it out of habit, or had he perceived an opportunity for renewing negotiations which had failed before? In the NKVD carriage, an officer had fallen ill with a chest pain. ‘Ladno, okay,’ said Father. ‘I will go to see him, but not until all the doors are opened and people are allowed out.’ Negotiations proceeded urgently. With power on your side, you can take a doctor to the patient, but can you make him treat him? But, perhaps you can, with a gun to his head, or to his wife’s, or son’s. Germans would do that, but Russians were not quite of the same mould. At least not yet. So Father had his way.

The number of armed guards on the platform doubled and the doors of all the wagons were opened. Father picked up his medical case, jumped out of the wagon and was shown to the guards’ carriage. It was a proper first-class carriage, of course.

With the door open I was one of the first to jump out. We were not allowed into the station building, but there were two lavatories on the platform. Two long queues formed within minutes. I did not wait. Like an experienced dog I found a suitable lamppost at the end of the platform. It served my purpose admirably. I never suspected that the human bladder could hold so much liquid.

Before long Father was back. There was not much wrong with the patient, he had been overcome by heat. Father gave him an injection of camphor. ‘He did not really need anything,’ said Father, ‘but I had to be seen doing something. He will come to no harm.’

While attending to the patient, Father wangled another concession: a distribution of kipyatok, or boiling water. This was normally available from taps at most Soviet railway stations. Ordinary tap water being unsafe, boiled water was very popular, and as soon as a train stopped in
a station the passengers would queue for the *kipyatok* tap. In such a huge country where people would spend days, if not weeks, in trains or in stations waiting for trains, the provision of boiled water was sensible, but it had not as yet reached the ex-Polish territories, like Pińsk, from where the vendors of soft drinks—being capitalists by definition—had disappeared.

So now the Pińsk station staff had to boil large cauldrons of water. It took a long time before the largesse reached us. But there was no hurry. We still had no locomotive. On this sweltering day the hot water was strangely refreshing and made me hungry again. Mother had five of Mrs Margulis’s sandwiches left over from breakfast. She gave Father and me two each and had one herself. That was the end of our food stores.

In the evening the heat abated a little, though it was still unrelieved by even the slightest breeze. The metal roof of the car was now only hot to the touch, but no longer burning. Tired and hungry I curled up in my corner of the shelf under the window.

I woke up with a start as the train jerked suddenly. Oh, the locomotive, I thought. Soon we will be on our way to Warsaw. I looked at my watch, but it was not there and I swore under my breath, ‘*psia krew* (Bloody Hell!)’—my swearing being still very genteel. Was it only this morning that it had been stolen?

But the train did not budge. The inside of the wagon was dark. I went back to sleep.

When I woke up again we were on the move, the train shaking like a peasant cart on cobblestones. I leaned on my elbow to look out. The sky was studded with stars. All I could see on the ground was a hedge of bushes and low trees and, beyond it, empty meadows dotted with patches of water, unruffled and shining in the moonlight. No houses, no lights.

Night noises filled the air of the wagon: deep breathing, moans and groans, discordant snores, short, sharp cries of bad dreams, and more ‘explosive’ sounds.

I must have gone back to sleep, and when I woke up again the rectangle of the sky in my window had changed to greyish-blue, with a pinkish-yellow glow in the direction in which the train was going.

Sunrise. With nostalgia I remembered another sunrise. It was May 1935, I was ten, and, again, I was on a train. I was on a school trip returning from Kraków, where schools from all over the country were
helping to erect a memorial burial mound for Marshal Piłsudski, *pater patriae*, who had died earlier that month. I woke up somewhere near Częstochowa, the city of the Black Madonna. I could see through the window that the bright red disc of the sun was halfway over the horizon. I was riveted to the view until the sun had fully risen and then the drama was lost. Another lifetime, another world.

I could not go back to sleep and lay there with my eyes open. Now everything was so different from that May morning: a cattle wagon, locked doors, hunger and thirst, but at least we were also going home.

The patch of sky above my head was now pale blue and the stars had disappeared. Again I leaned on my elbow, hoping to see the rising disc of the sun, but the hole was too small to lean out.

Suddenly, I was unhappy. Something was wrong. But what? And then it hit me. The sun was on the wrong side. We were going east, not west to Warsaw, but east towards the rising sun. The train veered slightly to the left and I saw the reddish gold disk just over the horizon.

I tried to think straight. There was only one railway line in Pińsk, the Brześć–Gomel line. On the map the line was perfectly straight. It went west to Brześć, Warsaw and then Berlin, or east to Gomel and then Moscow. And we were going east.

Another thought struck me. We were at least two or three hours’ travelling time from Pińsk. Had we been going west, we should now be crossing the relatively prosperous areas round Brześć, whereas here the countryside was sparsely populated and desolate. We were probably by now past the old Polish–Soviet border and in Soviet territory proper. I was confused. But I was right: we were going in the direction opposite to that intended.

People were waking up. The man on the shelf opposite, who was also by the window, had also been looking out. He said something to me but I could not hear him over the clatter of the wheels. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. He has no idea of what’s happening, I thought. Is he a fool, or am I? I looked out once more. There was no doubt, we were going east. I looked to my left. My parents were still asleep. I shook Father by the shoulder. He sat up, instantly awake. ‘The sun is on the wrong side,’ I said in a loud whisper.

Uncomprehendingly, he looked at me. I pointed to the sun in the window. He understood instantly. He leaned over me and thought, his
brows tightly knit. ‘You are right,’ he said. ‘I was afraid that this might happen.’

There was no mistake. We had been fed lies. We were on a journey not of our choosing. Destination unknown. And there was nothing we could do about it. Nothing whatsoever.

The news had spread. Within minutes everyone was awake. Some people burst into tears. Like yawning, crying is infectious and children echoed their mothers. The threat of deportation had always loomed large over our heads and here it had come to pass. What was in store for us? The frozen north? Kolyma? Vorkuta? Kazakhstan? Siberia? The dread, the terror, the menace associated with these names were overtaken in years to come only by those of Oświęcim (Auschwitz), Belsen and Mathausen, Treblinka, Chelm and Belżec. But at the time and for us, they were full of horror.

We were helpless. Escape from the train, even if possible, would not get anybody very far. This was the USSR. The country was one great prison swarming with militia, railway police, NKVD units, informers and spies.

In the meantime, we were getting thirsty and hungry. Another hot day had dawned. Every so often our train would stop on a siding to give way to other goods and passenger trains. The siding was always in an empty field, with not a soul to be seen. The names of small stations seen on the way meant nothing to me, while bigger towns were invariably skirted around, so that we could not even guess our itinerary. The wagons remained locked and during the stops only the guards could stretch their legs outside the train. They answered no questions and ignored our demands for food and water. Our journey lasted over seven days. Occasionally the train would stop near a village and curiosity would get a few inhabitants out. They were quite obviously used to seeing transports of prisoners or deportees in cattle wagons. Some commiserated loudly with us: ‘Poor, poor people. Where can they be taking them?’ Women often wailed loudly: ‘Look, they are deporting even babies and children. Will it never end?’ A brave soul or two would bring a loaf of bread, a bottle of water, an apple. Some of the offerings could have been passed between the bars. But the brutal guards would not let the locals get anywhere near the train. Swearing, shouting obscenities, they pushed them back with their rifle butts, knocking the modest gifts from their outstretched hands. With their heavy boots they
trod on bread, fruit and broken glass. Thirstily we watched the gifts of water sink into the ground. They were much rougher with their own people than they had been with us.

At every stop we all threw balls of squashed paper with our own names and with names and addresses of relatives out of the windows, we begged the finder to mail the note to the nearest and dearest. My parents were busy helping those who did not know Russian. The messages were easily thrown over the heads of the guards, and the peasants, children in particular, picked them up and ran away. We learned later that many of the notes did in fact reach their destinations. Though, as far as I know, none of ours did.

I had lost count of the days, but it was either on the third or on the fourth day of our journey that we skirted a large city, perhaps Moscow? The tracks multiplied and trains rushed past us every few minutes. Our train accelerated and suburban stations flashed by. The area was densely populated, but it seemed drab and desolate by our Polish standards. The villages were poor, reminiscent of the impoverished eastern provinces of Poland.

Empty stomachs and dry, parched mouths, hunger and thirst, were our constant companions. The heat outside continued unabated. Since leaving Pińsk we had been kept locked in our wagons and only once a day were two people allowed out of each carriage to fill our containers with water. But we did not have enough containers and water had to be strictly rationed, so there was none left for washing. Complaints to our guards during stops fell on deaf ears. Our toilet was disgustingly smelly and its emanations invariably drifted to my perch on the shelf above it. Everybody was bad tempered and sharp with each other—even Father. ‘It’s the lack of food,’ Mother tried to explain. People were prickly, but had no stomach for loud quarrels, bitter arguments. They were too apathetic.

From the end of the first day there was no food in the wagon. Nobody had any left. No one had expected a long journey. I do not remember individual days, they were all much the same. But I do recall the second day with clarity. It was the first whole day in my life when I had nothing to eat; not a peanut; not a crumb. Younger children, unable to understand why there was no meal coming, kept crying and asking for it, but at my age I knew better. The morning was the worst. My stomach was all in a knot. Later the pangs of hunger eased somewhat. I read for most of the
day: *Tikhii Don (Quiet Flows the Don)*, by Sholokhov, kept me occupied. By now I could read Russian without difficulty and only occasionally had to ask Father or Mother the meaning of an unfamiliar word. On the third day, the second day of our fast, I had slept most of the time. I had no hunger pangs. My stomach seemed satisfied with the scanty sips of warm water. Suddenly, in the middle of the third night, the train stopped on a siding. I heard engines rumbling. Then the door of the wagon opened a fraction and loaves of bread were thrown in by unseen hands. Before we managed to spread a blanket, the first few loaves fell on the far-from-clean floor. But nobody cared. It was food. The amount was adequate and the bread was white, fresh and delicious. ‘*Hunger ist der beste Koch* (Hunger is the best sauce),’ my mother used to say. Perhaps any bread would have passed the test under the circumstances.

Subsequently bread distribution was repeated every night during the journey, and on two occasions it was accompanied by soup, a bucket per wagon. It was cabbage soup with bits of meat and potato, the best soup I had ever eaten; though perhaps the same proverb applied.

The train was making slow progress, with long and frequent stops in the middle of nowhere. There was little change of scenery; the country was flat. We saw fields, meadows, forests, few roads, little motorised traffic. Tractors, so beloved of Soviet propaganda as a sign of progress, were few and far between, with horses still the ubiquitous means of transport and the main prop of agriculture. Towns and villages were quiet, sleepy.

The days and nights merged into one another almost imperceptibly and uneventfully. The dominant mood was one of apathy. The majority of passengers slept most of the time. Some played cards, a few read books or discussed politics. These discussions were uninformed; there was not a single radio set on board.

Other than their shared misery, the wagon population had little in common. Misunderstandings or incipient quarrels were quickly settled by my father, who, through no effort of his own, was thrust into the role of judge and arbiter.

Except for Mr Wasserman and Mietek, his son, I cannot recall a single face or name of our fellow passengers. Mietek was two years older than me and we talked a lot. He became a good friend. Later we shared a room with the Wassermans for over a year.
Life in our prison on wheels was orderly. Water, bread and soup were distributed equitably as soon as they arrived. Cleaning of the central floor area, which we called the parlour, and of the toilet was done by everyone in turns. Many wanted to exclude my father from this chore, asserting that it was ‘not a job for the doctor’ but he insisted on doing his share.

During our week-long journey several people died on the train and the bodies were removed at night. My father was escorted by the guards several times to see patients in other wagons but, in the absence of any drugs, his ministrations were restricted to the medical equivalent of laying on of hands. Luckily in our wagon nobody died and nobody became seriously ill.

The weather continued to be hot and sunny and, as the train puffed its way northeast under its canopy of smoke and steam, the days grew longer. The final two nights of our journey were very short indeed, each lasting not more than a couple of hours. The sunset left the western sky in hues of grey and yellow, while the golden promise of another hot day was already spreading from the east.

My perch under the southeast facing window gave me a good view of the sunrise morning after morning, but here, in the white-night country, the sunrise was far less dramatic than it had been on the more southern leg of our journey.

Well into the morning of the eighth day the train stopped on a slightly raised riverbank just short of a bridge. With a lot of shouting, swearing and clanging of keys the wagons were unlocked, the doors slid back and we were ordered out. The area was surrounded by armed guards. We did not need a special invitation to get out of the hot, stinking wagon. It was a delight to draw in a chestful of fresh air. Like animals long accustomed to their cage and suddenly allowed out, we stayed close to ours, the train. Apart from the guards the place was deserted; not a soul to be seen; not a roof, not a tell-tale wisp of smoke in the vicinity; meadows and barren fields stretched along both sides of the wide river and, except for the distant outline of a town in the direction from which we had come, the horizon all around us was a dark wall of forest.

With all the deportees out of the train, the guards stopped shouting and swearing; one of them even smiled and joked with the children.
Suddenly the joker stood to attention. A major of the NKVD approached our wagon: ‘Which one of you is the doctor?’

‘I am,’ volunteered Father.

‘Thank you for your help during the journey,’ said the man.

He stopped for a moment and was about to move on when Father raised his arm and asked, ‘Could you please tell us what is happening? Obviously, we had been misinformed that we were going to Warsaw. Where are we now? What will we be doing here?’ My father’s Russian was excellent.

The major stopped in his tracks and tried to smile. This did not come easily to him, the poor man was obviously out of practice. The contortions of his face were painful to watch, the angles of his mouth moved up but his steely eyes did not take part in the effort. ‘The German government had refused to have you back,’ he said. He hesitated for a moment. ‘And,’ he almost shouted, ‘you refused the offer of Soviet passports. You are an unreliable element. We had to remove you from the border area.’ He stopped again. His facial expression returned to inscrutability when he continued: ‘The river here is the Northern Dvina and the town over there,’ he pointed to the distant break in the forest wall in the west, ‘is Kotlas. You will be resettled in various forest stations in the area.’ His right arm described an arc to the north and east. ‘Na perevospitannye, for re-education,’ he added. He started on his way and then turned round again. ‘Zdes zhit budete, here you shall live,’ he added as an afterthought.

We had heard the expression before. The rumours circulating in Pińsk had it that deportees to Siberia were often taken under guard to a small clearing in an uninhabited part of the forest and left there to their own devices with just these words, ‘Zdes zhit budete.’

Another NKVD officer joined the major and they moved on. People from several wagons surrounded Father. They talked all at once, they asked questions. I moved out of the way. I had heard of Kotlas as the gateway to the northern exile territories of European Russia, stretching from the Ural Mountains in the east, to beyond the Northern Dvina River in the west and to the White Sea in the north. At that time the railway line ended in Kotlas and only later was it extended farther north into Komi, an area notorious for its labour camps. I did not listen to the discussion in the group surrounding my father. I had my own gloomy thoughts to digest. The exhilaration of being let out of the stinking

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wagon soon dissipated. It was still very hot, even this far north the midday sun was burning.

I looked at the river again. It was very wide and even here, not far from its source, it seemed wider than the Vistula in Warsaw.

‘Fancy a swim?’ said a voice. It was Mietek.

My brain cleared in a flash. ‘Yes...but will they let us?’

Mietek asked the nearest guard. He did not seem to object, but just laughed. I wondered why. It was a mischievous kind of laugh. We stripped to our dirty underpants, ran onto the bridge and dived in.

In the next instant I knew the reason for the guard’s amusement. The water was ice cold. The shock was devastating. Carried by the momentum of the dive, I went down and down. My heart, squeezed in some frosty fist, seemed to have stopped. Frantically I worked my way back to the surface. Terrified out of my wits I opened my mouth to shout for help, but could produce no sound. I could not breathe. I was overwhelmed by the thought that I would never get out of this river alive. A few moments later my muscles came back to life, I swam towards the shore and just about managed to crawl out of the water, shivering, my teeth chattering. I collapsed on the wet grass, not at all invigorated. I was the first on the shore. Mietek and several other boys who followed my example scrambled out looking half-dead. Nobody paid any attention to our plight, but no one actually went missing. After a few minutes in the hot sun we recovered, dressed and joined the multitude milling around the train. The guard who had condoned our escapade smiled broadly.

Kotlas was the end of our first cattle-train journey in the USSR. We unloaded, and the train, all forty wagons of it, departed, leaving the bank of the river crammed with people. At the rate of forty passengers per wagon—minus the few who had died during the journey—we totalled well over 1,500 people. Guards patrolled the riverbank. The hot noon merged into a warm afternoon, into a chilly evening and then into a cold night. Family groups and groups of friends huddled together round their belongings. I was again hungry when in the evening a couple of trucks arrived bearing cauldrons of soup and sacks of bread. The news then spread that we were spending the night on the riverbank. Bundles of bedding were undone and blankets, coverlets and eiderdowns came out. Soon the children stopped crying, but sleep did not come to the adults. Speculations, discussions, musings went on through most of the night. The absence of real darkness in this

Excerpt from THE ICE ROAD © 2005, 2010 Alice Faintich
white-night country was also not conducive to sleep. Somebody obtained a newspaper from one of the guards by bartering it for a cake of soap. It was brought to my father to read and translate. A group surrounded our bivouac and the war situation and matters political and general were discussed at length. ‘The French had not done any better than our Army...Mussolini is a hyena...to fall like that on a carcass...shame...disgrace...at least they did not sacrifice Paris...like Warsaw...The Americans will have to come in...’ I listened intently at first, then with only half an ear, until, eventually, I must have gone to sleep.

When I woke up in the morning a low, dense, cotton wool–like mist sat on the river and spread up the bank. The far bank was totally invisible. The factory chimneys and the high-rise blocks which yesterday formed the distant skyline of Kotlas in the west had also disappeared in the fog.

The day was in full swing. For breakfast we had the remains of last night’s bread washed down with Dvina water. People were packing their bags and boxes, making their ablutions in the river. The sun rose, the fog was lifting slowly. Suddenly several open lorries arrived and one stopped near us. Both the driver and the driver’s mate were women. One of them let the tailgate down. ‘Collect your belongings!’ shouted the nearest guard, the same joker who had sent us into the freezing river. Loading didn’t take long. Mietek was the first to climb on board and soon the platform of the lorry was full of luggage, all the seats along its two sides were occupied, the tailgate was banged closed and we were off. We were in the first truck to leave, with the Wassermans, with another couple from our wagon and several other families I did not know. We were lucky: we learned later it was several days before the riverbank was cleared.

The lorries were big and heavy, designed for rough, unpaved dirt tracks cut through forests and for crossing clearings, meadows and swamps, where the track was recognisable only by ruts in the ground. Our journey was a good imitation of an obstacle course, with roots and upright stumps of felled trees littering the surface, while rotting fallen tree trunks forced the driver to make detours.

Just behind the driver’s cabin, I noticed two big metal drums, one on each side, with pipes attached top and bottom. Seeing my puzzled look, Mr Wasserman, an expert on all things mechanical, explained: ‘This truck runs on wood gas made in those two cylinders. When it runs out of
fuel, the driver just feeds it more wood. No shortage of that around here.’ And sure enough, several times during the afternoon journey we stopped in a forest clearing, the two women got out, felled a tree, cut it up with saws and axes and chucked the bits of wood into the drums. It was the first time I witnessed tree felling, which was to become, so to speak, my daily bread. But was it really a job for a woman? I wondered.

It was also the first time that I saw cigarettes rolled in newspaper. At every stop, having replenished the cylinders, the two women sat down either on tree stumps or on the step of the driver’s cabin, took out pouches of makhorka, an inferior kind of tobacco, in fact tobacco stalks and dregs, and deftly rolled their cigarettes in squares torn out of a newspaper. These cigarettes stank abominably, and as I bent over the side of the truck to see better, the smoke stung my eyes. A punishment for being nosy.

We had little contact with our drivers. They were civil, even friendly, threw about just a few obscenities which, as we had already learned, were part of the daily conversation, not really meant to be offensive. Sayings like ‘Fuck your mother’ came naturally to most ordinary Russians and served to stress a point. Nothing personal, you understand.

After about six hours of the cross-country drive during which we had seen no human habitation, the lorry stopped just short of a small town or large village. Once more we were left with our belongings by a small wooden jetty on the bank of a river; this time with only one local militiaman on guard. An ancient rifle hung on a piece of string from his shoulder. A friendly soul, he told us that the river was called Uftyuga and the town’s name was Petrakovo, that Petrakovo was the seat of the selsoviet, or the rural council, and thus the administrative centre of the area. ‘Tomorrow,’ he concluded, ‘you will go up the river, to lesopunkt, the forest station, Sloboda, and there you are going to live.’ This expression, zdes zhit budete, was pursuing us and was getting on my nerves.

More trucks arrived in the course of the afternoon and deposited their human cargo in Petrakovo. By the evening two or three hundred people were camping on the riverside. We found ourselves in a group with the Wassermans, father and son, and several other couples and families: Mr and Mrs Żółtyński, Mrs Żółtyński’s brother, Henryk, who was about my age, Mr and Mrs Brzeziński, Mr and Mrs Gruszyński and the Romer family.
As the crowd on the riverbank grew larger, the number of guards increased but never exceeded more than three or four, and they were local militiamen, not the NKVD. This and the absence of any guard during the truck journey was surprising. Also, puzzlingly, the village seemed dead. Occasionally a human form showed in the distance between the houses, but nobody came anywhere near us.

‘This is a creepy place,’ I said to Father. ‘Deserted. And where are the NKVD guards?’ I wondered aloud.

‘We are now in NKVD country,*’ he said. ‘No guards are needed here. Escape is almost impossible. There are no roads, no footpaths, no public transport and no human habitation for hundreds of miles. Every village and town has its NKVD informers. Local people either act as informers or are so intimidated that they would be afraid to shelter you, give or sell you food or water, or help you in any way.’

Late in the evening two horse-drawn carts came to the riverbank, with *shchi*, or cabbage soup, *kipyatok* and bread. The bread was black, moist and heavy. But it was bread and, after a day without food, it was more than edible.

I must have slept like a log and did not even hear more lorries arriving during the night. By morning the crowd on the river bank had increased to about six hundred. In the early hours, as we were washing down the remains of last night’s bread with fresh *kipyatok*, a dozen or so long narrow-boats arrived. Each boat was propelled by one man standing at the stern, wielding a long pole and driving it into the riverbed. Two more men materialised by the jetty. They were not in uniform, but the taller one in particular exuded an air of authority. He counted out several dozen people, which included our group. ‘We shall walk with this first group,’ he said. ‘Put your belongings on the boats.’

The footpath ran along the river. ‘We’ll take it easy,’ said the tall guide. ‘It’s forty-two kilometres to Sloboda,’ he said. ‘We should get there by tonight. White nights are good for walking,’ he smiled. He looked at me. Did I imagine it, or did he wink?

But it was heavy going: the footpath was uneven and full of potholes, while projecting roots, rotting tree trunks and stumps barred the path every few yards. We were a group of townies and not very good walkers.

* Later called the gulag by Solzhenitsyn.
Mr Gruszyński had an enormous belly. He ought to have a wheelbarrow to carry it on, I thought unkindly. His puny wife was no support, so he had to be helped by others every few minutes. My mother was also on the heavy side and tired easily. In the following months, on the Siberian diet, all the fat people rapidly lost weight and, eventually, even Mr Gruszyński began to look respectable.

Again we were not guarded. The footpath was narrow and our long crocodile, at times in single file and at most two abreast, was headed by the taller of the two Russians and closed in the rear by the other. But they were not talkative. The friendliness the two men displayed at the start of our march evaporated. At some point Mr Romer managed to engage the leader in conversation. But all he learned was that his name was Volkov, that he and his companion were on the administrative staff of Sloboda, the forest settlement which was our destination, and that Sloboda consisted of two sections, Kvasha and Vasilyevo. It was also during that walk that we first heard a phrase that we were to hear again and again over the subsequent two years and which, in my memory, will always be associated with life in the USSR. It was short, simple and to the point and in Russian it even sounds melodious: Privýknete, a kak ne privýknete to podókhnete. Roughly translated it means: You will get used to it or, if you won’t, you’ll croak.

The walk was uneventful. We continued along the river, usually just by the water’s edge, holding onto overhanging branches here, crossing bogs and little streams over the slippery logs thrown across them there. Our feet in city shoes were saturated almost from the start. In spite of the hot summer the water was freezing cold. People generally helped each other. Father and I tried to keep near Mother who, at times, needed two pairs of helping hands. Our Russian guides did not hurry us and we rested every hour or so. What bothered us more than anything since leaving the train in Kotlas were the veritable clouds of insects. The long northern winter restricts the activity of insects to a brief period in the middle of the summer when they feed intensely, and now we were providing them with an easy meal. There were clouds of mosquitoes, hordes of ordinary flies and countless black midges which crowded into our eyes, noses and ears. The painful bites of some voracious black insects, each about an inch long, left rivulets of blood trickling down our legs, while the equally big but slimmer horseflies were also not averse to human flesh. Keeping the insects away was a fulltime job, especially
during rests. It required both hands and was so tiresome that after a few minutes we were eager to be up and moving, even without prompting from our two Russian leaders. There seemed to be no end to this interminable trek.

Then, after about ten hours, we stopped at the edge of a large forest clearing. From here the path went slightly downhill and deviated from the riverbank, to merge into a dirt track, and then into a street passing between some twenty one-storey timber buildings of roughly the same shape but of various sizes.

‘This is Kvasha,’ said Volkov, adding the inevitable, ‘Zdes zhit budete.’

We stood there in silence contemplating the future. The prospect did not seem inviting. By no stretch of imagination could the place be described as picturesque, interesting, or pleasant. In fact, it was grey, drab and desolate. The clearing occupied by the settlement extended for about two hundred metres along the riverbank and was about a hundred metres wide. It was totally surrounded on three sides by the dark green wall of the forest from which it had been obviously wrenched by hard work. A similarly impenetrable dark line of forest blocked the view on the other side of the river. There was a column of smoke rising from a chimney of one of the buildings. The canteen? There was not a soul in view.

We had arrived.

_Zdes zhit budete_, here you shall live. Now, fifty-six years later, I can still hear Volkov’s words, and their tacit implication: here you shall meet the end of your life.