

Anna Zaleśna (1931 -)



Rotherham, 2013.

I was born on the 19th of December 1931 in Lwów, at that time in Poland. My parents were farmers, and they owned thirty-one hectares of land and four hectares of forest. This made it an average-sized farm, with calves, chickens, pigs, horses and dogs. It was self-sufficient and excess produce was sold to the town. Beautiful gardens and orchards surrounded our house, which also included walnut trees. There were six children in the family; one eldest sister, four brothers and I was the youngest. My sister was married when I was three years old; she lived with her husband in Lwów, where he was an area Director on the Railways. Another brother was a teacher and another helped dad with his business while the rest of us went to school. During WWI, dad was a prisoner and forced to work in a factory, here he learned to make shoes. Later he set up his own workshop at home and made shoes for the family. This would later prove to be a useful trade in Russia, where he would repair shoes in exchange for payment or goods. My mother stayed at home to look after the children and to work on the farm. During the summer, dad would employ people to help out with harvesting in the fields. My mother cooked for them, and they would be paid in either money or goods; it was their choice.

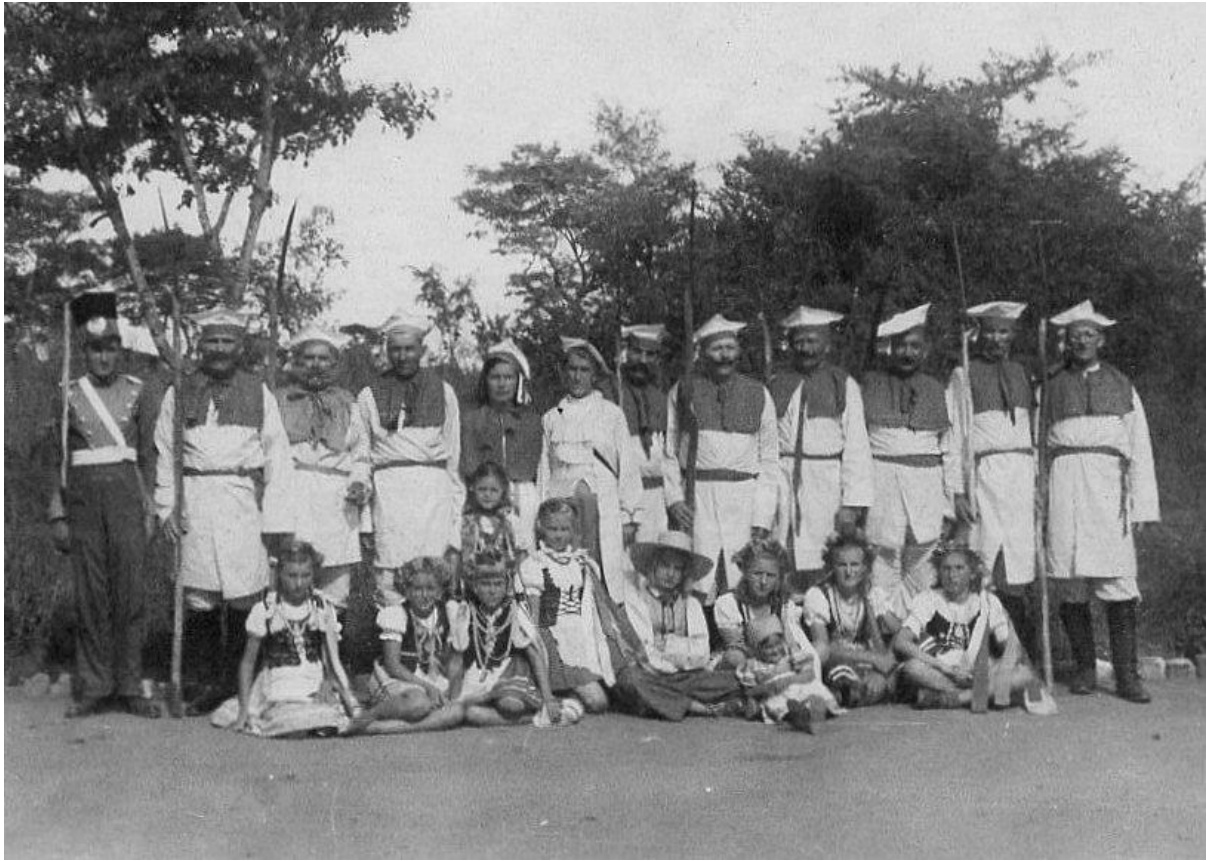
In preparation for winter the neighbours would gather together; the men would cut chop down trees as fuel for the fires; the women would sit and do the embroidery etc. We had a very close family until one particular day on the 10th of February 1940, in the early hours of the morning, there was a loud knock on the door. We opened the door to find there were two men from the NKVD (later the KGB) with guns inside their coats. They ordered us to get up and stay still while they searched our house for weapons. Of course they found nothing, as we had none. Their next order was for us to get dressed and to get out of the house. Outside the weather was atrocious with very heavy snow; we passed our gate and said our goodbyes to the house and animals. We were taken to a train station and here we saw two engines with goods carriages waiting for us. This was happening all over the country on the same night. Since there was a shortage of Railway Directors, my sister, her husband and their child were allowed off. Aboard the train, forty people were packed into each carriage of the goods train. When the train moved eastwards, we knew that Siberia was awaiting us, as this had happened many times before in Polish history. People were being captured and sent to labour camps, men with their wives and children. It was too terrible to describe in words...The journey on the goods train was awful, with so many people squashed together. There were two wide shelves at each end of the carriage and we had to try to sit on these hard boards. The journey took about three weeks. It was hell.

We were packed like sardines in a tin. It was very dark inside with just one small window at the end of the carriage. Toilet facilities consisted of nothing more than a hole in the floor. If anyone wanted to relieve themselves they would cover themselves with a blanket to hide their embarrassment. Adults were let out into the open twice a day, guarded by armed soldiers. We were also fed twice a day with the same cabbage soup with pasta and oil on top; half a bucket was shared between each carriage. Some people had managed to take some scraps from home; this helped a bit. Eventually we arrived in Siberia in Krasny-Bor (in English this means 'beautiful forest') not far from Irkutsk (one of the largest cities in SE Soviet Union). Here, there were wooden barracks waiting for us. Two families shared one room, divided by a board; there were no mattresses. These quickly became infested with pests which ate away at the beds and at us, in turn. During the summer we gathered grass to dry and make into mattresses; there was one primitive stove in the room. The older members of the family had to work in the forest collecting resin from the trees. The younger children had to attend Russian school; this went on amongst conditions of cold and hunger. The motto was if you don't work you don't eat, and if you don't work, you would die of starvation.

Polish graves lined the many roads of the Soviet Union...

More paragraphs available in the book...

Anna Zalesna finally arrived in Southampton on the 28.05.1948 and eventually settled in Rotherham, where she lives to this day. She has very kindly provided this account.



Sokoły, I am in the front row, Rusapa, Rhodesia, Africa @1942.



Here I am receiving an SPK presentation in Sheffield in the 1960s. The SPK Rotherham was an association in which I played a very active part.