

A Holiday in Siberia: A Child's Story of Survival in a Soviet Concentration Camp

By the time Marysa Dac was seven years old she had spent Christmas in at least four different countries. This happened not because her father was a businessman (though he had been) or a diplomat (he was not) but because her family had the misfortune to be living in eastern Poland when it was annexed by Soviet Russia at the beginning of the Second World War.

Since she was only a baby of 16 months when the horror that engulfed her family began, she has almost no direct memories of that time. It was her older siblings, in particular her brother Michal, who told what they suffered – and, miraculously, survived. Here are some scenes from the story she told me recently at her home in Auckland, New Zealand.

It is February 10, 1940, in Przemysl, south-eastern Poland. It's very cold. The family are awakened in the middle of the night by thunderous knocking and a posse of the Soviet secret police break in. "Get up, get up!" they shout, and order the family to pack their bags for a "two-week holiday" in Siberia. They have an hour to get together warm clothes and anything essential they can think of before being hustled into an army lorry and starting a nightmare journey that will end at a forced labour camp in a frozen land.

Three weeks later they have reached the train that will take them into Russia. Wacek, the father, Rosalia, the mother – Marysa in her arms, her sister Aniela, who is 6 or 7 years old, and Michael, who is 12, are crammed into a wagon with dozens of others. The same thing is happening to thousands of their countrymen in this mass deportation. They do not know when they will eat again. There are no sanitary arrangements.

The train with its cargo of unwanted Poles begins to move and their homeland is left behind.

Their new home is a barracks shared with three other families. It is near a settlement where the older children go to school. Marysa spends only one day in a “nursery” before her mother sees that her baby will not survive there and keeps her at home. Their father labours in the nearby forest, earning a daily ration of just one flat loaf of bread for the family. Since the mother cannot work, Michal presents himself for work in the forest so they can have another ration, but his father soon puts a stop to that, fearing for his son’s life. He needs to stay alive for the others.

They get word that another parcel has arrived for them at the camp depot. Grandmother has been sending them food – dried mushrooms, pork lard, other things. Wacek and Michal walk the five miles through the snow to collect the parcel. They can see it has been opened but are not allowed to reopen at the depot. When they do, they find the food has been taken and replaced with sand. They are pierced by the cruelty and injustice of it.

In the forest the men fell trees and dig deep graves. People are dying every day of malnutrition, disease and exhaustion. Sometimes, because of the depth of the holes and the wetness of the snow a man will not be able to get out and the others will not be able to help him; he will die there. When the digging is finished, the men in Wacek’s work gang are told to stand at the end of their grave. Then they are shot in the back of the head. The widows and children are helpless in their grief.

It’s some time after July 30, 1941, and the survivors at the camp are told they can go. War alliances have changed; suddenly the Polish Government in Exile is an ally of Russia and the Polish men are forming an army on Soviet territory to help the allies fight the Germans. But Papa Stalin is not

making it easy for his new friends. The starving and exhausted Polish men have to make their own way to recruitment centres, and the civilians with them, with neither money, nor food nor organised transport.

The Dac family begin another long journey that will take them through Kazakstan and Uzbekistan to an evacuation point on the Caspian Sea. They will walk most of the way, stopping for periods of time at improvised camps near villages or collective farms. Because Marysa is still only 3, she has to be carried.

Rosalia is sick. They have reached a place where there is some kind of hospital and she is taken there, while the children are given shelter in a barn. It is soon clear that their mother is not going to recover and she is brought back to her children. Young as she is, Marysa will retain a memory of those moments in the barn when, as Michal and Aniela ease Rosalia from a sitting to a lying position, she also has her little arms under her mother when she dies. The body is taken away.

14-year-old Michal has full responsibility for his sisters. He trades items of clothing for food. The village people are sympathetic but can only spare, perhaps, a jug of milk. The trio, like other children travelling with them, forage in the vegetable gardens of collective farms for potatoes, onions and other produce, which usually has to be eaten raw. On one occasion Michal slips little Marysa under a fence into a tomato patch where the growth is thick and she cannot be seen by police on horseback. She instinctively knows to keep her ear to the ground so she can tell when the horses are approaching or have passed her.

Marysa is missing. The refugees have stopped for a long spell in some village or settlement and she has been taken home by a little girl who lives there. For three months she enjoys adequate food and shelter, and her distraught siblings only

discover her when they are about to leave and happen to hear someone calling her name. Was she kidnapped? Or was it an act of charity that perhaps saved her life?

By now Michal has volunteered for the army, but will stay with his sisters until they are in safe keeping. In the final stage of their pilgrimage, from somewhere in Uzbekistan, they are taken by train to the Caspian Sea, from where they will be shipped to Persia. This happens in either March-April, or August-September 1942. In Pahlavi, at last, the refugees receive food and rest, and emergency health care, but the civilians are soon moved to more permanent camps near Tehran or Isfahan. The Dac siblings go to separate camps in Isfahan, according to their age or state of health.

Marysa has TB and goes to hospital. All she can swallow is yoghurt, and it is not certain that she will survive. Michal, now in army uniform, comes every afternoon at 2pm with walnuts he has shelled while waiting for visiting time to start. He wraps her in a blanket and sits her on his knee and says, "Come on, I want you to eat these and get well." If it were not for his effort she might not be alive today.

When she is a little better she goes to Camp 9 where the other sick children are. It is heaven to be in a proper room with a good bed and good food. The Shah, who is their host, comes to visit them. For the first time in two years the Polish exiles have the joy of being attended by Catholic pastors, and Marysa receives her First Holy Communion in a bulky white "frock" made from a bed sheet and a veil made from curtaining.

Michal leaves to go with the army. It is a very sad parting and the girls will not see him again for many years, because he will settle in England and they will end up on the opposite side of the world.

It is now November 1, 1944. Marysa and Aniela are on an American troop ship with 700 other Polish children, most of

them orphans, arriving at Wellington, New Zealand. They are accompanied by 100 guardians and returning Kiwi soldiers who have made a fuss of them on the way. The Prime Minister of New Zealand, Peter Fraser, comes on board to welcome them. Photos are taken and then they disembark, each clutching a little parcel or bag containing all their worldly goods. Kind ladies give the children sweets.

The welcoming rituals continue as they go by train to a camp in the country town of Pahiatua. The train goes slowly, stopping to let groups of people along the way shout and wave their greetings. They are to stay at Pahiatua at least until the outcome of the war is known, or until they are old enough to make up their own minds where they want to be. For Poles, the outcome of the war is such that few choose to return to their homeland.

Marysa left the camp at 11 and went to board with a Kiwi woman until she was finished school and had entered the workforce as a seamstress. In 1961 she married another Polish immigrant, Frank Jaskiewicz, and they had four children. Widowed since 1994, she has several grandchildren and leads a very active life, which includes helping in her Catholic parish and involvement with the Polish Association.

The thought of her father's and mother's deaths can still bring tears to her eyes, and she still feels the absence of her mother in her life. But Marysa is also well aware that, given the early hardship that brought her almost to death's door, that her life has been a kind of miracle, one that she gives thanks for every day.

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