My name is Oskar Tojzner.
I survived the Holocaust.
This is my story.

Oskar's Story

Part 1 · My Childhood 1923-1939

The story is based on several interviews with Oskar Tojzner.
Oskar Tojzner has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

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My Childhood 1923-1939

My Family

I was born on 26 October 1923 in a little village called Granie. At that time the village was in Poland, near the border with the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. My parents were called Sonia and Moshe Tojzner. They both came from religious Orthodox Jewish families. When I was born, I was given the first name Oskar and the Hebrew name Asher after my maternal grandfather.

I was the second oldest of five siblings. My older brother was called Aba and my younger brother Shul. His Hebrew name was Beitzalel but we used to call him Cala-Shul. I also had two younger sisters, Jochewed and Chawa.

When I was six years old I started at a boys' school in Granie. It was a Polish school roughly a kilometre from our house. We children were also given homeschooling in Hebrew. When we moved to the nearby town of Dąbrowica, my father paid for our schooling in the Jewish school. Not everybody could afford that at the time.

It was a nice and enjoyable school and I only have positive memories of it. As a teenager I took part in lots of different activities, amongst other things sports and theatre. I was also a skillful chess player.

I'm the one standing on the far left in this photo, followed by my brothers Beitzalel and Aba. About a year and a half separate us brothers. Aba who is oldest was born in 1922, myself in 1923 and Beitzalel in 1925. Our younger sister Jochewed standing on the right was born in 1927, and Chawa at the front in 1930. In the front row sit my mother Sonia and father Moshe Tojzner. Father had been married before, but his mother and children were murded in a pogrom in Granie. Father never spoke about the event, but a relative told me everything many years later. [The pogrom probably took place in 1918 or 1919, after the end of the First World War. During the turbulent time that followed, Jews in many towns and villages in the border region between Poland and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic were attacked. *Ed.*]

The photo was taken the same day we found out that Jaakov, my uncle on my father's side, was alive. He had been transferred along with other soldiers to Siberia during the First World War. When the Russian Revolution took place in 1917, Poland became independent and the border was closed. It wasn't until as late as the onset of the Second World War in 1939 that we made contact with Uncle Jaakov again.

Our town Dąbrowica was close to the border and the Russian troops that attacked Poland from the East were quick to capture our town. One day during the spring of 1940, we heard that someone had phoned and was looking for our family. I had just come home from school. We didn't have a phone of our own so Mother and I went to the post office to take the call. When Mother picked up the receiver, a woman on the other end of the line told her that Uncle Jaakov was alive and that he was in Moscow. As soon as Father had finished work for the day, he went straight to the post office to ring his brother. We had a photograph taken of our family the same day to send to him. Uncle Jaakov died later on during the war. I visited his wife in Moscow in 1945 and it was there that she gave me the family photo.

My maternal uncle Asher Kanat was a teacher in Beresznitza which was close to Dąbrowica where we lived. It was a *shtetl*, a small town, where a large part of the population were Jewish. Mother had many siblings: four sisters and three brothers. Two of the siblings emigrated to the USA at the start of the 1900s. One of the uncles, Beitzalel, took this photo with him when he moved. It was given to me many years later by my cousin Evelyn.

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Life Before the War

This map shows the borders of the 1921-1939 Second Polish Republic. The red dot marks the location of Oskar's home town Dąbrowica, roughly 30 kilometres from Sarny.

A church and a farmyard in Dąbrowica, 1929.

We lived in a lovely house with a large garden. It was in the town centre where a lot of Jews lived. Mother was a housewife and took care of us children. Father worked in a factory where they manufactured turpentine. By burning tree stumps, they could separate the floating oil from the thick resin. Father was responsible for the whole process. The factory was a couple of kilometres out of town so he used to sleep over there. He would come home on Friday and be together with us until the weekend was over on Saturday evening.

I had a good friend who lived in the house next door. We used to meet up on Saturdays when we were free. During the summers we used to be outdoors a lot with other boys our age, going for walks or swimming in the river. During the winters we used to go sledging on a big hill nearby.

In Dąbrowica there were also Poles and Ukrainians. We had different football teams and separate holidays. The different groups didn't tend to hang out with each other that much. But my older brother Aba and I did have some non-Jewish friends who we met during our spare time.

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Oskar's Story

Part 2 · Life Changes 1939-1940

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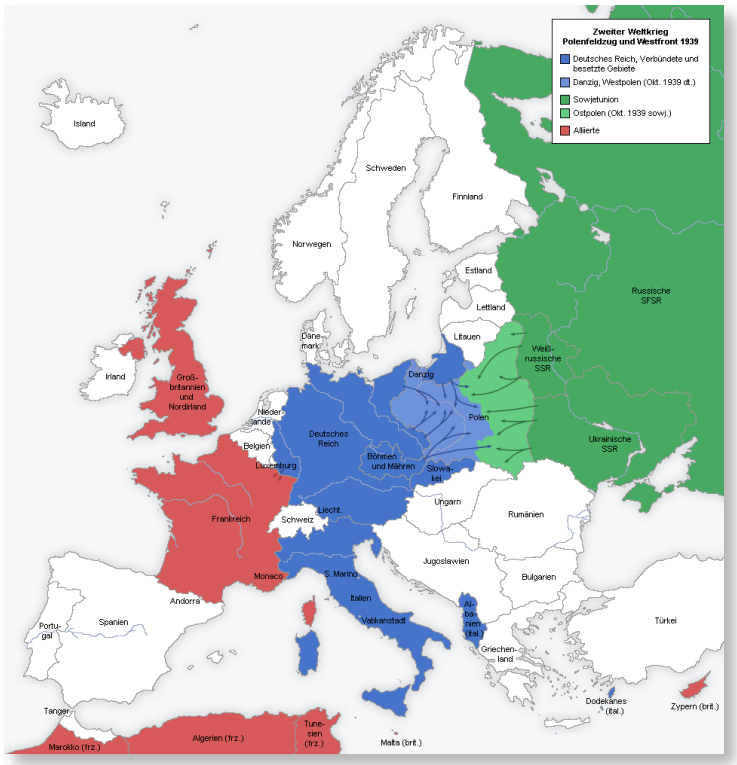
Life Changes 1939-1940

The War Breaks Out



The Second World War broke out on 1 September 1939. Germany and the Soviet Union invaded Poland. The countries had agreed not to attack each other. The pact was named Molotov-Ribbentrop after both countries' foreign ministers. The agreement was broken in June 1941 when German troops invaded the Soviet Union.

Soviet cavalry in a Polish town after the 1939 invasion.

The Second World War broke out in September 1939 and Poland was divided between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. When the Red Army came to Dąbrowica, the state took over all factories. Father was transferred to the office in the town centre. He continued there as a technical chief under Soviet control

Before the outbreak of war, we youngsters often talked about the future and dreamed about who we would become and what we would do.

We were no longer allowed to use Polish or Hebrew textbooks when our school became Soviet. All teaching had to be given in Yiddish, a language that a lot of Jews spoke. We knew that this would present difficulties for us when we applied to the university and we would rather have been taught in Russian. Some other students and I started a petition. It took us a couple of weeks to get round to all the families but we succeeded in getting the school to allow us to use Russian books.

You went to school for ten years in the Soviet school system. For those of us who had gone to school in Poland, this meant retaking a year. The atmosphere changed when the school became Soviet, and we were exposed to Communist propaganda.

After high school, Aba wanted to continue studying and he travelled to Vilnius in what is today Lithuania. The Communists tricked him when he got there. They promised that he would receive a free education in the Soviet Union and that they could help him. But it was a lie. Instead of arranging a decent education, they sent Aba far out to the East to the coal mines of the Donbass region. He managed to escape after a year.

When Aba came home, he was just skin and bones. He'd been given so little to eat. I wil never forget that sight. Mother cried and father watched over his bed.

It took several weeks before Aba had recovered. Later on, Father took him to his work where he helped out with the bookkeeping.

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The Threat from Nazi Germany

Many refugees came to our town from the German-occupied part of Poland. They told us how the Jews had been persecuted, arrested and subjected to beatings. Many children had lost their parents. A girl who started in my class spoke of how the Nazis had arrested her father. She came with her mother to Dąbrowica since they had relatives there.

There was a lot of talk in the Russian school about how, when the Germans advanced further out to the East, they would exterminate all the Jews. Military exercises were arranged for us youngsters so that we would be able to defend ourselves.

I think that my parents would have tried to flee if it had been possible for them. Father's boss said that he could arrange a horse and cart or the whole family. But my mother didn't want that. She was poorly and regularly visited a specialist doctor. Maybe they would have survived it they had left Dąbrowica.

"There was a lot of talk in the Russian school about how, when the Germans advanced further out to the East, they would exterminate all the Jews."

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Oskar's Story

Part 3 · The Escape Eastward 1941-1945

The story is based on several interviews with Oskar Tojzner.
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The Escape Eastward 1941-1945

Escape to the Soviet Union

We learnt in school that, in order to have a future, we needed to leave town before the Germans came. Mother didn't believe that anything would happen. She wanted all of the family to remain in Dąbrowica. I asked her: "Do you want the Germans to kill us?" This wasn't very nicely said of me, but that was the picture of the enemy that the Russians had fed us with. Aba also said that we had to flee. He argued that we wouldn't survive if we stayed. Then Mother agreed to the plans and let even our younger brother come along.

Oskar and Aba.

We set off at the start of summer in 1941. There were many other girls and boys who were also trying to flee. Beitzalel was only 15 years old. I was 17 and Aba 18. We were stopped when we got to the old border between Poland and the Soviet Union. I asked them why they were blocking us since we were Soviet citizens. But arguing didn't help. We couldn't go any further.

An acquaintance saw us and offered to give us a lift home. There were many people asking questions when we got back. People in the town came out onto the street and wanted to know who we had seen and met along the way. Everyone was worried about the youngsters who had set off.

Kiev, 1941.

The war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union broke out in June 1941. A month or so later, when the Germans had already reached Dąbrowica, we tried to flee again. This time my mother forbade our younger brother Beitzalel from joining us.

My older brother Aba had arranged horses and carts through the father of his friend Alexander Schwarztoch. When Aba, Alexander and I reached the border, we left the horses at the station and travelled with a freight train to Kiev. The city had been bombed and we slept rough in a park for a whole week. We only had summer clothes since it was warm.

Aba and Alexander tried to figure out how we could go on further. Someone gave them an address and then they arranged places for us on a boat to Dnipropetrovsk.

We travelled together with a number of boys from our town. From Dnipropetrovsk we continued on to Kharkiv. A few continued to Gorky, closer to the Ural Mountains roughly 300 kilometres from Moscow. But we had such thin clothes that we decided to stay where we were.

We found work on a *sovchos*, a farm owned by the Soviet State. As winter approached, my brother was drafted for service in the army. It would take a long time before I found out what his fate had been. I wrote to the authorities in Moscow who replied that they didn't have his address and were missing his details. Later on it transpired that they had lied to me. Aba had been shot and was buried at the front.

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I tried along with some other boys to get drafted into the Polish army but we were too young. So we continued onwards to the other Soviet Republics in Central Asia. First to Tashkent in Uzbekistan, and then westwards to Ashgabat in Turkmenistan.

We found work in a little town with a textile factory and worked picking cotton on a collective farm, a *kolchos*. It was heavy labour. We carried 40-50 kilos on our shoulders and worked 12-14 hours every day.

I was struck by a high fever and was bedbound for many weeks. When I had recovered, we decided to continue our journey. There was nothing for us there. Nobody asked us what we needed, or gave us other work or a place to live.

When we were due to enter another republic, we were ordered to show our permits. We didn't have anything like that. The police started to ask us where we were going and to whom. Then they let us go. We had nowhere to go and our money had almost run out. We bought something to eat with our last few coins and sat down on a bench.

A man came by as we sat there. He looked at us but walked on. After a while the man came back and asked us where we had come from and where we were headed. Then he offered us a place to live. He even said that he could arrange work.

The man who had noticed us in the park came from a Jewish family that had emigrated from Poland to Central Asia. He was the boss of a shop that distributed bread. It so happened that there were already a number of Jews living in the man's home. He kept his promise and arranged work for us.

One of the man's employees, Kress, also came from Poland. He was an economist who worked with bookkeeping. He was a nice, friendly man. We started to talk. I explained that I had ten years of schooling but hadn't managed to graduate with a qualification. Kress wanted to learn more Russian and thought that I might be able to help him. So, as a service in return, he promised to teach me bookkeeping.

Military Service at the Ural Mountains

I worked together with Kress in the city of Ýolöten (Ioloten) for one and a half years, up to 1943. Then we got called up for service in the army. Kress and I ended up in a military base in Nizhny Tagil in the Urals. There was a Russian company there called Uralvagonzavod that manufactured combat vehicles.

We lived in bunkers where only the entrance was visible above ground. I was lucky. A Jewish man from Moscow heard that I was good at Russian and asked what my trade was. When I described my work experience, he offered me the position of secretary.

I got on well with the work. Thanks to being offered this position, the military couldn't post me to the front. I was given a special document to present at checkpoints.

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Oskar's Story

Part 4 · Returning Home 1945

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Returning Home 1945

What has happened?

When I was in the Soviet Union during the war years, I couldn't send letters or ring my family in Dąbrowica. I tried to get in touch after the Red Army had pushed back the German troops and taken over my town. First I wrote directly home but didn't get a reply. Then I wrote to the civil service and asked them what had happened to my family. They replied, writing that my family had been exterminated. All were dead. Not even the house where we had lived remained.

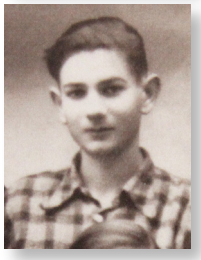
When I went back to Dąbrowica in 1945, I travelled via Moscow to visit my uncle Jaakov. His wife took me in. It turned out that Jaakov had died in the war.

There was a photograph of my family in the house. I had taken the same photo with me from home when I fled. But I had been robbed and it had vanished. Therefore I didn't have any pictures left. When Jaakov's wife heard this, she gave me the photograph. It is the only one left that shows my mother, father and siblings.

The Fire in Dąbrowica

Nothing was the same when I got back to Dąbrowica. There used to be two factories in the town centre that manufactured cooking oil. The man who owned one of the factories had built a secret room under the building. He hid there for many months. When he realised that the Germans had driven away all the Jews, he set himself and the building on fire. The flames spread along the street. The synagogue where Father used to go to as well as many other houses burnt down.

The Family has been Exterminated – There is No One Left

My mother Sonia and my father Moshe.
My little brother Beitzalel and my younger sisters Jochewed and Chawa.

A few Jews had managed to escape from the ghetto and survived. I met them a long time afterwards and they told me what had happened to my family in 1941 and 1942.

Father and my younger brother Beitzalel had been made to carry out forced labour a few kilometres outside of town. I don't know what they did but it was physically demanding work.

Then the Germans had gathered up all the Jews and transported them to Sarny. The Germans had tricked them by telling them that there would be better work for them there.

There was a resistance group, the partisans, who hid in the woods. I met the leader Nachman many years later in Israel. He told me that the entire Jewish population of Dąbrowica had been driven to the train station. When they reached a bridge, Nachman had shouted a warning to them and encouraged them to flee.

When the people began running in different directions, the Ukrainian guards started shooting. They even shot those who were standing still. Mother was hit by one or more bullets and ended up lying on the ground. My father, younger brother and my younger sisters were forced to continue on without her.

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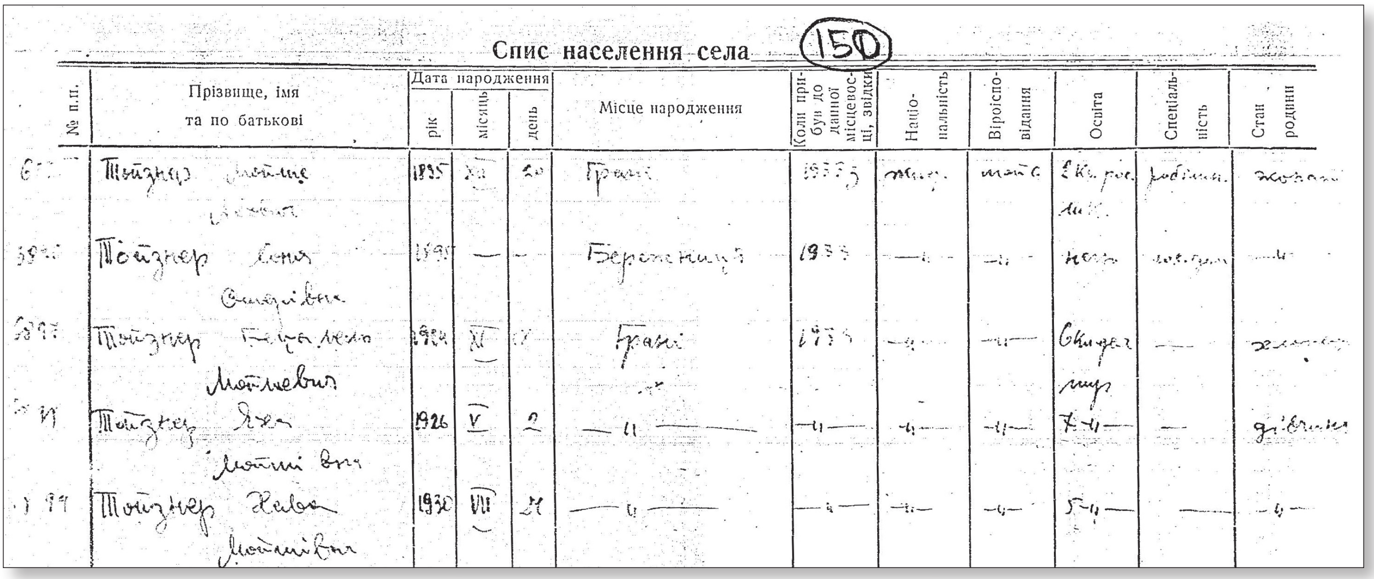
At the train station in Dąbrowica, before the train left for Sarny, my father and a number of other grown-ups started to pull off the wooden decking on the floor of the carriage. A group of youngsters —five boys and two girls between thirteen and fifteen—managed to escape through the opening. My younger brother was one of them.

The youngsters got themselves over a river and, since they were soaking wet, the girls went in to a little village to ask the Ukrainians who lived there for some matches. They were deceived and returned together with Germans armed with rifles. When my younger brother and the other boys saw this, they started to flee. The Germans shot everyone, including the girls. Only one boy managed to get away.

A Polish family who knew the boy helped him and made sure that he was sheltered by the partisans. He lived in Kiev after the war but emigrated later on to Israel. He explained everything to me when I visited.

The Germans had prepared mass graves in the woods outside of Sarny. My father and younger sisters were driven there along with other Jews and murdered.

When I came to the town in 1945, you could see the mass graves. The corpses were only covered by a thin layer of soil. A number of us tidied the place up. Later on we erected a memorial.



Спис населення села (150)

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[illegible]	Тойзнер Хава Мошківна	1930	VIII	21	— " —	— " —	— " —	— " —	5 — " —	—	— " —

The names of Oskar's family members are listed in this document: parents Moshe and Sonia, younger brother Beitzalel, and sisters Jochewed and Chawa. The names are at the top in the first column with the family name Tojzner, with their years of birth in the second column. The page is part of an entire list drawn up by the authorities in Dąbrowica in 1942. It lists the town's inhabitants by name, year of birth, occupation and marital status.

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Oskar's Story

Part 5 · In the Gulag 1950-1953

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In the Gulag 1950-1953

In Prison with the Soviet Secret Police

I got married to Nina in 1945 and we settled down in Sarny. Our daughter was born two years later. She was namned after my mother Sonia who was also called Sofia.

I managed to set up a business in town without needing to get a loan from the bank. The business was going well. My employees and I got on well with each other. Our family moved a while later to Równe. From there we continued on to Chelyabinsk in Nina's home region in the Urals. Our plan was that she would continue her legal studies there. When she was finished, I would start my own studies.

Suddenly one day the NKVD, the Soviet Secret Police, came to my office. They told me to send out my secretary. Then they went through all of the documents. They turned everything upside down, even at home.

I was suspected of espionage. The police asked questions about which roads I used to take, if I had a car and so on. I told them about my company and what I worked with. They told me that, as I had such a nice job, I shouldn't have spied. Nothing that they accused me of was true. But it didn't help. They took me with them to prison. I was locked up there for one year from 1949 to 1950.

The NKVD tried to get me to confess to the alleged crime and sign some documents. I refused. Then they waited two weeks before bringing me for interrogation again. The NKVD officer sat by a table and wrote at the same time as he ate. He used to eat ham amongst other things. I was hungry and he knew it. I had no opportunity to contact my family and nobody came with a food parcel. The secret police did exactly as they wished, and they often insulted me.

There were four or five thousand of us prisoners and it was very overcrowded. Criminal offenders shoved people off their bunks so that they fell onto the hard concrete floor. That might have happened to me had it not been for the fact that they liked listening to my stories. I had read a lot in my youth and had a good memory. So the criminals sorted out a safe place for me.

There was no defence lawyer at the trial and I was sentenced to three years' hard labour in a Gulag. I hadn't done anything wrong but was accused of "thinking about committing a crime". They said that I had planned to cross the border with Poland. I had been in prison for a year when I received my sentence. The way I see it, they punished me because I was a Jew.

FACTS: **GULAG**

After the October Revolution of 1917, special camps were set up for political opponents. In 1929, the Soviet Union's leader Josef Stalin started building a larger system of camps to support the country's industrialisation.

Criminals and even political opponents who had been accused of supposed crimes were sent to the camps. The prisoners were used as slave labourers on large-scale projects and to extract natural resources such as gold, coal and timber.

Gulag, as the prisoner and work camp system was called, was used above all to maintain control over the population. Millions of innocent people were imprisoned and forced into hard labour for periods ranging from five to twenty years in the camps.

The prisoners worked outdoors and in mines, in inaccessible areas and in the Arctic Circle without proper clothing, tools, protection, food or even clean drinking water. Sometimes even children were taken to the camps and placed into special barracks.

Children who were born in the camps remained with their mothers until they were about two years old before being transferred to orphanages managed by the NKVD.

Between 1929 and 1953, over twenty-eight million people had worked as forced labourers. The camps started to be disbanded after Stalin's death in 1953. They closed for good in 1986.

Gulag is an abbreviation (from the Russian ГУЛАГ, Glavnoje upravlenije ispravitelno-trudovych lagerej) which means "Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps".

Sources: Nationalencyklopedin, Gulag. http://www.ne.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/lång/gulag (accessed 16 May 2016)
"Gulag: Soviet Prison Camps and Their Legacy", National Resource Center for Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies, Harvard University.
De sovjetiska lägrens historia ("History of the Soviet Camps"), Stockholm, 2004.

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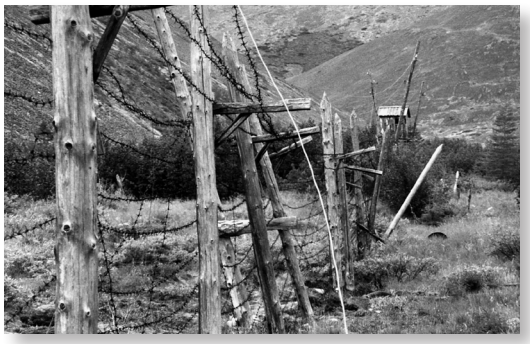
Three Years in a Camp in Siberia

I was transported to the Gulag camps of Kolyma in northeastern Siberia. There were forty-four prisoners in my group. I was responsible for dividing up our food according to the prisoners' work efforts. Each day I had to measure the stacks of timber to work out how much each of us had worked. One day I happened to knock one of the stacks with my foot so that it collapsed. Then I discovered that they had been putting forest waste in amongst the tree trunks. On the short sides were stumps of timber but, inside the stacks, there were only branches and twigs. They had fooled me! Instead of ten cubic metres of timber, there were only two.

The other prisoners were murderers and seriously criminal offenders. If they had gotten hold of me they would have killed me since I had revealed their trick. I fled when their backs were turned.



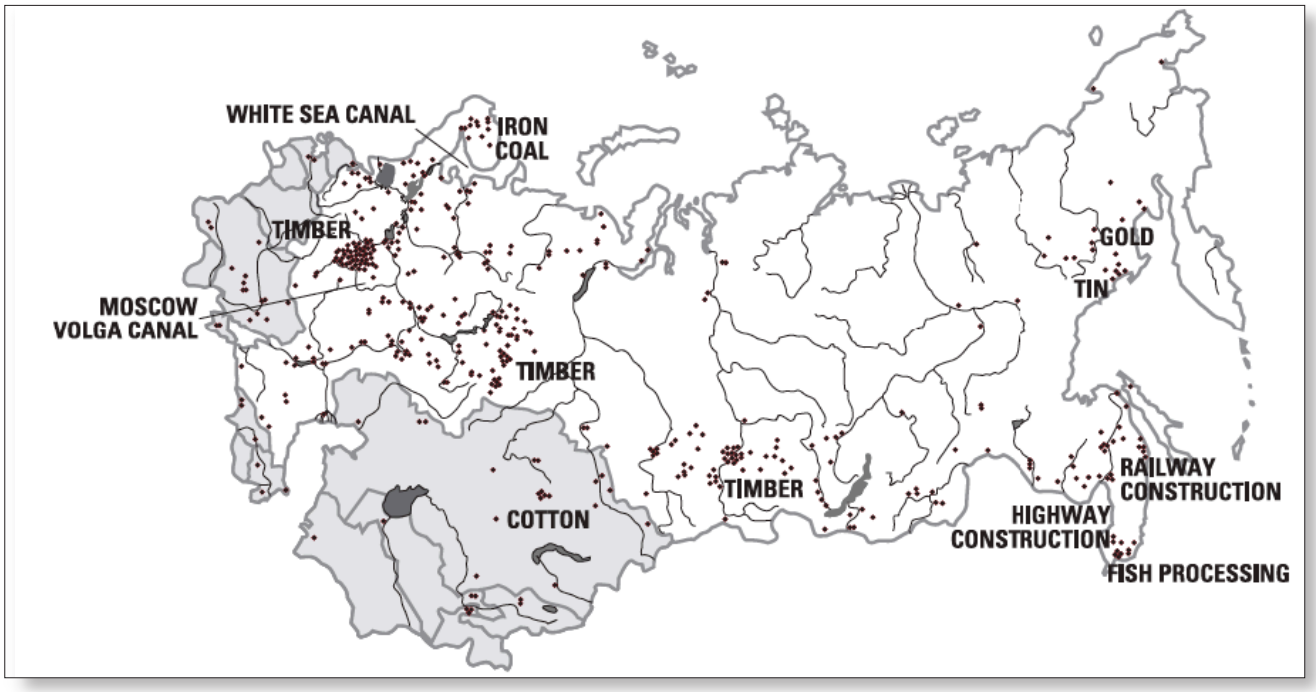
One of the previous Gulag camps in Kolyma, Siberia.

Camp inmates in Kolyma.

About forty kilometres further on was another camp. I explained what had happened to the boss there. Then he took me by car and drove me back to the camp I had fled from. They placed me in a new workplace with a man called Glagoljev. He had earlier been on the Central Committee in Moscow. Now he was the chief of an area of Kolyma.

The Siberian climate was grim. There was no summer to speak of. The ice only thawed at the end of May. The prisoners started washing gold that had been extracted from the mines as soon as there were running streams of water. The cold was already on its way back in August. Sometimes the temperature sunk to sixty degrees below zero.

You needed to have felt boots, *valenki*, in order not to freeze to death. It didn't occur to me to pull my trousers over the boots. I got snow in the boots and almost lost a foot to frostbite. The other prisoners gave me what they could, a cloth or a bit of fabric, and one of them wrapped the rags around the foot so that I would manage to get back to the camp.



The map shows the spread of the Gulags in the Soviet Union and the large-scale building projects undertaken by the camp prisoners as well as natural resources that were extracted using forced labour. The black dots show larger camps. Around these were many smaller camps.

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Some people tried to flee when I was in the camp in Kolyma but they were captured and killed. The guards laid out their bodies in front of the entrance to the camp. We passed the corpses every day. Since it was fifty to sixty degrees below zero, the bodies stayed there for ages. I couldn't bear to look at them.

That was how time went by until 1952. That was the year I was set free but, since I was regarded as a traitor, I wasn't allowed to return home. I was given permission one year later when the camp was reorganised after Stalin's death. That was when I travelled back to my wife and daughter.


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6-ВЩ
СПРАВКА № 0003783
Видом на жительство не служит. При утере не возобновляется.
8 марта 1952 г.
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1923 года рождения, уроженцу (ке) д. Дубровица Ровенской обл.
гражданство (подданство) СССР национальность еврей
осужденному (ой) Спец. Лаг. Судом ИТЛ „БП" МВД СССР
«23» августа 1950 г. по ст.ст. 19-84 УК РСФСР
к лишению свободы на три лет с поражением в правах на — года, со слов
имеющему (ей) в прошлом судимость ранее не судим
в том, что он (она) отбывал (ла) наказание в местах заключения МВД по «8» марта 1952 г. и по отбытии меры наказания с прим. зачетов рабочих дней
С применением
Освобожден (на) «8» марта 1952 г. и следует к избранному месту жительства Ровно (город, село, дер., район, область) Ровенской обл.
до ст. Ровно жел. дороги.
Начальник лагеря (ИТК) Подполковник (Остапенко)
Нач. отдела (части) Капитан


Отметки о выдаче продуктов и ден
Дата и подпись производившего
Расписка освобожденного

There is a photo of Oskar with a stamp on the back of the certificate.

This certificate of release was handed over to Oskar by the camp chief. Its notes reveal that Oskar had been a good worker and that he had therefore been released a few months ahead of schedule.

The text on the certificate reads:

Certificate issued to Oskar Tojzner, born 1923, Dąbrowica.
Nationality: Jew, Soviet citizen.
Sentenced by Special Camp Court. To be placed in Work and Correctional Camp BP.
MVD [Ministry of the Interior] CCCP, 23 August 1950, accused according to paragraph 19-84.
Sentenced to 3 years. No previous convictions.
Released 8 March 1952.
Wishes to return to Rovno [alternative spellings: Równe, Rivne, *ed.*]

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To Poland and Onwards to Sweden

Our son Michael was born in 1955. At that time we lived in Równe in what is today the Ukraine. When Władysław Gomułka came to power in Poland as the leader of the Communist Party, I applied for permission to leave the Soviet Union. The application was rejected. There was nothing more for me to do but to continue living there even though it was difficult. I lost my job because of the antisemitism. I sorted out a new job in Dubno, roughly fifty kilometres from Równe. It took me six hours each day to travel there and back.

We had a little house with a basement, two rooms and a kitchen. A woman rented a room in the house next door. Her sister was a chief in the NKVD secret police. She found out that we had applied for a visa. One day, my wife rang me suddenly to tell me that we had been given a week to leave the house. It turned out that the sister of the NKVD chief needed our house and that was why we had been given permission to leave the Soviet Union.

Nina, Michael, Sofia and Oskar in Legnica, Poland, in the beginning of the 1960s.

There were a lot of practicalities to arrange before the move but we managed it. We reached Poland in December 1959. I had written a letter to an acquaintance to tell him that we were on our way. He met us at the border and took our whole family to Legnica (Liegnitz) in what is today southwestern Poland. I started to build up a new business there after a while, a cooperative, and started employing people.

In 1969, antisemitism in Poland was on the rise again. Not everyone was an antisemite and nothing bad had happened to me. But other Jews had been ill-treated. That was when Nina and I decided to emigrate. I handed over the business that I had set up to a Polish acquaintance and, at the end of 1969, we came to Ystad in Sweden—myself, Nina, Sofia and Michael.

Text and cover photo: Ewa Wymark | Translation from the Swedish original: Carl Franks

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