

## **Memories from my deportation to Siberia: 13 April 1940 to 27 April 1946**

The Soviets came during the night, banging on the door and demanding we turn all the lights on. They told us we had half an hour to pack. We did not know what for, or where we were going. We were loaded into cattle wagons at the railway station. There was a big hole in the middle of the wagon where you had to go to the toilet.

Our journey to Kazakhstan in Asia took over a month in those cattle wagons and was escorted by Soviet soldiers. We were brought to Podpusk, which is in the Pavlodarski district. Podpusk is situated on the banks of the very wide river, Irtysh. There were seven families; women and young children plus two or three boys aged about 13-14. The men had been arrested whilst we were still in Poland. It was not a 'camp' which we had been brought to; there were no particular facilities prepared for us. We just had to try to find accommodation with the people of the village, but we did not speak their language nor they ours.

The river bank on which our village stood was very high and steep. This was the route we took to fetch water everyday for our domestic use. This was also where the cows and other animals grazed. In Winter, this formed the route to cross the frozen river to reach the other side. On the banks of the river we also cut and dried grass during the Summer to provide feed for the cattle. The sparsely wooded forest was where we were able to chop trees to provide wood for manufacturing. In the wintertime we transported the hay and wood to Podpusk where it was used.

One winter morning when the temperature was about -30 degrees Celsius, the manager in charge of us ordered Franek, a boy of 14 and me, to go and fetch the wood. He gave us the use of 6 bulls and 4 sledges for this. One large bull pulled the sledge which had a team of two bulls tied to it, whilst a further large bull also pulled a sledge with two bulls attached to it. We slid down the hill together with the manager. The main channel of the river was already freezing over and had a dusting of snow on it, whilst the water near our path was not frozen. This was a cutting of the river of about 1.5 to 2km long in which there was a strong current and deep water.

Passenger and goods ships used this waterway extensively in the Summer. We reached the frozen bank of the river and walked some considerable way upstream to distance ourselves from the area which was not frozen. Then the manager got off the sledge and walked on the ice. He came back and said that we could cross the river here. We argued with him, because we thought that this was still too close to the unfrozen part of the river and was therefore dangerous. The manager stubbornly insisted that there was no danger, that he had proof that it is safe and that we could safely cross. We had to cross! Indeed we did make the crossing safely and reached the forest where there was chopped wood. We loaded the sleighs with wood spread along their length and then tied large timbers to the sleighs to keep the wood in place. We set off for our return crossing.

We moved out onto the ice and slowly started to cross the river. We thought everything was going well and that we need not have worried earlier on. Just as we reached the other side, near the path which rose gently up the steep side, we had a problem. The ice had cracked and began breaking up underneath us. Franek quickly took hold of the reins which the young bullocks were wearing and wanted to lead them to the shore, but he could not. The sleigh was sinking and dragging them back. Franek did not panic. He called out to me, because I was still some way behind him with the other load: "Quickly release the bulls, because we are sinking." I saw that we were in a very dangerous situation, because the cracking of the ice was already reaching me. So I had to run and quickly release the large bull, because the piece of ice on which he and I were standing was already beginning to tilt. The large bull was in the water, but free of the harness. At the last moment, I

managed to jump off the sinking piece of ice onto another piece where there was another of the large bulls. Quickly I had to release that bull, too, from his harness, because the ice was sinking and the bull was in the water.

Finally, I jumped into the water which was over my ankles. I thought I had released the bulls, but as the ice sheet started to sink, I realised that I had to reach dry land. Thanks to my guardian angel, I reached the shore and quickly ran to Franek. Together, we then tried to save the pair of young bullocks, but to no avail. Our wet shoes slid off the hard face of the rock. We had to release the bullocks from their harness, because we did not have the strength to pull them out onto the shore, but the area of unfrozen water was now larger and reached beyond our dwelling. In reply to our calls for help, a number of people gathered and some of them ran to bring boats to save the bulls, who were swimming with the tide downstream. The sleighs which were loaded with wood all sank, because rescuing the bulls was more important. Our mothers, too, had come down to the riverbank and hurried to take us home to get us warm and dry us out, because our clothes were soaked and our feet felt like ice. They gave us some food, too, since we had not eaten all day.

My sister had the task of looking after the animals. As she told us later on, she rushed to the old stable and spread out lots of hay and closed the windows. When the bulls were lead to their stable it was therefore warm and comforting for them. The bull which had suffered most was the old bull. He did not have the strength to swim against the flow of the river and so was carried about one kilometre downstream. But the men of the village had managed to rescue him and brought him back. Since he had been in the freezing water for so long, my sister knew that she had to try to warm him up. The men brought him to the warm old shed which she had prepared and laid him on the hay. My sister then vigorously rubbed the bull's legs and spine with hay. When she went to see him the next day, the bull had managed to stand up.

We thought that our unfortunate day had ended there, but it had not. That evening, the manager came to our house to let us know that if even a single bull has been lost, he would not be blamed; Franek and I would. This greatly surprised us. It was not our fault that the situation had arisen in which we could have lost our lives and we had, after all, done our utmost to save the bulls. Luckily all of the bulls were rescued. God was looking after us. If the ice had cracked whilst we were on the far side of the river, or even worse, whilst we were in it, there would have been no hope for us. The Kazakhstani people would have rescued the cattle, not the people. At the end of the day we were near the high, steep bank, but the narrow path gave us the chance to be saved.

Thanks be to God for His tender care.

Mrs Helena