Saskatchewan Archives Board, Transcript from SAB Tape R-500
Oral History Interview with Stan Gomulczak
Interviewed by Ted Zarzeczny, Sr.
Interview in English

Stan's Journey: Part 1

Stan:
I was 13 years of age when Germany declared the war upon Poland, November 1st, 1939. February 10th, 1940, I was taken out by Russian army to the depth of Russia. The Poland was split in two. Germans came from west and took the possessions on the River Bug, which was 9 kilometres west of the place I was living. My place was nine kilometres, as I said, to the east, so Russian armies occupied the eastern part up to the River Bug, [where] I was living. It was said by some that policy of Stalin was to occupy Poland and keep it. So his policy was to resettle Poland with Asiatic people, and took about 2 million of Polish people to Siberia, and to gain the free labour. We were taken out on Feb. 10th about three o'clock in the morning, transported about 15 kilometres to the railroad station, loaded on the box cards, very small box cars, about 50 people each, and I remember that night, the temperature was about 33 below zero centigrade. Quite a few had frozen fingers, frozen ears, and small children were also bitten by frost. Now the men were separated in the different box cards, so there would be no problem of interference from our side. Now as I was boarding the box car, I saw the next car in front of us. The Russian soldiers slammed a steel door, and one woman was crying because her child was left outside, and her head was split in half, so she was dead right there. It took about five days to reach the eastern Polish-Russian border. Now the train stopped, until today I don't know for what reason, and he backed and went forward quite a few times, across the border. Now we are loaded and transferred to Russian trains on wider tracks, and then remained on that train for 28 days through Russia. There were giving us water once in a while and hardly any food. Sometimes the doors were locked for as long as two days.

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Stan's Journey: Part 2

Interviewer: Could you remember which year was that?

Stan:
That was 1940. Yeh, by the way, we crossed the border Feb. 15th, 9:15 in the morning. Now we were taken to Siberia, which is about 300 kilometres past the Ural Mountains and put to labour in the forest. There were about 705 people brought into that camp. First few months, we weren't pushed to do hard work. We were more or less being settled in log cabins, few families, 2, 3, sometimes 4 smaller families placed in a one room cabin. As spring arrived, we were put to work in the forest, which sometimes is hard to describe in the English language because the phrases were used in Russian. That is, to take the pitch out of the pine trees, the red pine trees, by de-barking the very thick bark all around the trunk of the tree, and then by cutting with the hook knife a long groove, a long vertical groove, placing a wooden trough on the bottom end of it, then every – about three days, you cut the two side cuts, starting from the top, through which the sap, the pitch of the pine seeped down, and then to the small cup on the bottom, placed underneath the groove. Now mostly the men were doing the work. Women were gathering from the cups and hauling in big wooden buckets over the broken, fallen trees, swamps and putting in wooden drums, barrels, which are also constructed at that camp. There are also huge pine trees cut down and drawn or split about a metre long, cut to big blocks and then split, then drawn to strips about 3 inches wide which been taken away and used for stucco purposes, as we use a wire mesh in this country. Now the children were taken to school up to 14 years of age, and anybody over 16 were sent to work. I found myself – I been 15 – so I wasn't forced to work, either to school, so I was kind of a free boy.

All the work that was done was the piece-work, called "norma". To produce the "norma" a day, for which certain amount of money was paid to you, was almost impossible.

Would take about a week to do the norma, for which we got 7 rubles. Now the snow, in winter time, was getting four to five feet high and still the people were chased to de-bark the trees in that deep snow. We used skis and also the snowshoes. Now the people, I mean the women, had to go to work 'til 60 years of age, the men 65. We had a doctor in the camp, the Russian doctor, which he could relieve anybody who was sick, relieve from work duty. But you had to have a fever. If you had no fever, you had to go to work. I remember my mother had a piece of forest designated for her working about four feet of snow, and she was falling down, exhausted, but she was still forced to go to work and she was sick. So she went to the doctor, she had no fever so she was still forced to work. But could not come to work, so they put her for three months (would be wrong for to say to put to prison, because we were in a prison camp, but she was put to jail.) In a few words it's hard to describe the conditions of the camp because it would take more than a tape or more than a day. But it seems to me, and that was the statement of anybody that was there, that the Russians brought us in, not to resettle us in Russia, but to put us to death, but still get everything out of us they could get.

One year passed, and spring arrived. Then we had the news from some people that were remained in Poland that the Germany attacked Russia. AND apparently the front was going through the place where I was living. Now during the war, German and Russian war, the things deteriorated to the point that they even stopped giving us any food. So from there on, was really getting bad. We started gathering any food that we could find in the forest, that is mushrooms, and until this day, even, I can go to the forest and pick out all kinds of mushrooms and eat them. I know them quite well, and the low-bush cranberries which could be preserved without the sugar, we are taking them about twenty pounds at a time, going to the forest with a pocket knife and debark the birch trees, make a container, even cook the water in the bush, cook the berries, make a tea out of the berries, get the juice out and then drink it, and then fill your stomach with the mushrooms. And that's the food we had to live on for the next month. Then it was going towards the fall when finally we were liberated.

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Stan's Journey: Part 3

All the people during that time, they always had hope. They always said it's impossible that things could be that bad, it could deteriorate to the point that the people were put to death. Even the God will not permit this. So the people had the high hopes and they thought that it's impossible that anybody for the things, for the conditions could exist on this earth. But during the course of our stay, which lasted 19 months, about 19 months, out of 700 few in that camp, only about 180 survived after 19 months. A few months after the war, that is German-Russian war, General Sikorski, which was a Polish leader outside of Poland in London, made a non-aggressive pact with Stalin and formed the army to fight the common enemy, which was Nazi Germany. So the commanding chief in that camp … called a meeting, general meeting of all the people and proclaimed that each person is a free, and he was inviting us to seek the citizenship of Russia and we'll live good, as the Russian say that if you work good, you're going to live good. Those words were repeatedly heard every day. And then we could travel from one place to another. A lot of families were taken from one place, after about two years of war, and placed in an different factory in a different place so they could not have the communications between them. And while we were going to Russia, we met thousands of people sitting in the stations waiting for their trains, and we also saw the hunger amongst their own people. So we knew right away what was coming. The reason for that is that the people would not get together, not to get organized and have…. Sometimes it's hard to explain to the people living in the free world what kind of system it is. If you start talking communism or the Russian communism, Russia has so many police and so many spies that there's always a spy among you. And even the family or the members of the family are spying against their own families. And you never know that one night, even saying a word of criticism against the government or against the system, the people does disappear out of sight. After a while you'll find out they were put in the work camps for five, ten, fifteen, and as much as 25 years. And I can't make any quotations but I heard terrific numbers of the Russian people sent to camps for a long period of time because they were one way or another, disagreeing or complaining about the system, about the government. So we were brought and we were told, and we could see this, not to complain or not to say a word. And in the Russian saying, [*the transcriber could not make out the Russian words.*] That means, “Very well and very good” all the time.

Many times I hear demonstrations going in Canada, especially the last few years. People demonstrate, people rebel, especially the young people, against the government, against the system, against society. And all the time, every time I see things like that, my thoughts go back and the only thing I can say, just go and see how it is to live someplace else. Then you’ll know how lucky you are to live in a free society that you can protest, and you can live, and have a free, freedom of speech and feel free. Until this day, it’s hard to explain how I feel about authority. Every time I see a policeman or any officer of the law, something happens in my body. I fear, and I can’t help it, but I still get that fear in me. And yet I know that he’s not an enemy of mine or there’s no harm coming, but I still have that feeling, maybe because I was still young, and I could not overcome that fear.

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Stan's Journey: Part 4:

After about 19 months being in that camp, we finally had a chance to leave. The Russians did not provide any transportation. As I mentioned before, the commanding officer of that camp, he was a soldier, he told us we had a free hand to travel or to go any place or to resettle in any part of Russia. So one delegate from our camp went out and purchased a train car, a box car. Again, for which we had to pay quite a big sum of money. We did not have much money, but we picked up all the remainders of any clothing that we had, especially the shoes from leather or any … cloth and we sold them to Russians and then purchased that car. Then we packed that car so full that there was no room, or we could barely close the door. Then there was no provision for food or money for any food to buy, as usually there is not food to buy in Russia, because everything at that time was given to the worker by coupons only. Now that was fall, and we had about 30 kilometres from the camp to the railway station. My mother was sick in bed and my father was barely walking. So I took all our possessions, mostly bedding and some clothing and walked all day and night. I made two trips to the train and back and with the second trip again, we, that is my father and I, we led my mother by shoulders and hands to the station.

Then the doors were locked, and we were supposed to be a free people, but we still were under guards …. We traveled in that box car to the southern part of Russia where the Polish army was forming. That was [*transcriber could not make out the place name]* near Caspian Sea. For 68 days in that car, now there was no food, we weren't given any food. The only thing we could get [was] what we could find along the way, or get out from the car, get our own water, or get coal for our heating, we had a box stove in the middle of the car with a chimney going straight out and the corner of that car we had a few blankets hung across and a hole chopped through the floor for toilet purposes.

And we were again about fifty people in that box car. It took us 68 days to arrive to the point because we were many times … put as long as a week on the side tracks and left there. On arrival to the point of destination, we met some Polish authorities then, and some army posts, Polish army posts. Then that's the first food we were given, which was canned milk and some buckwheat soup and that was the first time since we left, or since the beginning of the war, we attended the Polish mass. We were brought in the [*transcriber could not make out the place name.]* That was a district of Turkestan. And for 3 months we weren't put to any work or given any food. So many people died, and how many I don't know, because we lost the contact of the whole group. We were separated with the small, two or three families, to the different places. And we lived there. Then we heard that they were admitting men to the Polish army. So my father left about three weeks ahead of me. Then after, I started out with a friend of mine, which was about a year younger, tried to join the army. So we walked about a day and a night. It wasn't very far. It was about 14 kilometres. But we made it. We came through the gate and then again we were given food and I was admitted to the army, but the other friend of mine, he was sent back, because he was too young.

After three weeks we were taken on the ship across the Caspian Sea. Then we came to Iraq. And we were trucked through Iraq, Syria, Transjordan and Palestine. In Palestine we were regrouped again and I was put in the young Polish soldiers' school, in which I remained for approximately 2 ½ years.

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Stan's Journey: Part 5

There, there were Polish schools organized and I entered the school and finished my high school there, until I reached age of 18 years of age, and I was taken to a regular army again. And that was the time when the troops landed in Sicily in Italy. And we were put to the front in Italy. The year 1944, there was a big front and the whole of Polish army of the second war in which I was serving under General Anders, affiliated with the 8th British army. We went through Monte Casino, first Camp Basso, Monte Casino, then the Po Valley all the way to Austrian border.

In 1944, May 15th, the war ended, and we remained a little while in Italy, hoping that we can go to Poland. But the Yalta agreement turned differently. Half of the Poland was given back again to Russians. So on the English side, they were demobilizing us but slowly, because they were afraid of revolts and some kind of disturbance of the Polish army. (*At this point in the interview, Stan asked to make a correction*.) The war ended May 15, 1945. Then we remained in Italy until the fall of that year. Then slowly, units after units, we were shipped across the sea to Britain. In Britain, instead of being demobilized or sent back home, we were put back to work. The English authorities said that we were not prepared for civilian life. So they formed a Polish resettlement corps, which was supposed to be preparing the person to work and to enter the working force. We were called in smaller groups and trucked to different places to dig potatoes, work in the garden. Myself, one time, we were taken by truck to about 25 miles distance from the camp and put in a hug barn where about four feet of manure was accumulated in the barn, given for us for cleaning out. We were quite weak because the food at that time was quite scarce. Britain itself at that time was on the verge of bankruptcy. All the food was rationed in the whole of Britain, so even our pay we could not buy food. Then shortly after, we had a chance to go back to Poland, but not as soldiers or as a free man, but go back to the same place, to the same regime as we came out from, before we entered the army. Because at that time, the Russians control the whole of Poland. So there were a few soldiers that the rest of their families were still in Poland or they had some knowledge of them so they returned. But most of them stayed on.

Then during the fronts, we were going – we were fighting with Australians, with the Australian army, American army and the English. Some of the countries were willing to give us a chance to immigrate and to have a new home. The soldiers that were serving in the Polish Lancers and they fought in Africa with Australian armies, Australia agreed to take all the soldiers to Australia. But then we heard that Canada is admitting some immigrants. Because there were telling us that 52,000 farmers were seeking for help on the farms.

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Stan's Journey: Part 6

We hard that Canada was admitting people, or the men only with the good health, and there were conditions. He had to have a clear record, first of all, then he had to be single. You could not be wounded or disabled. No more than grade twelve education. And not older than 36. Well, I was in that category. And I passed the medical. Then, about a day later, after I passed, I found myself on the ship *Aquitania*, from Southhampton going to Canada. I arrived to Canada June 10th, 1947. Under the blue sky, the port of Halifax, still in army uniforms. From the ship we were taken… loaded on the trains, and still the same thing over again. We were escorted by the RCMP in locked passenger trains. We could not leave the train or get off the train. We came through Montreal and could not speak to anybody. We were taken on the station that there was a wire mesh on … both sides of the tracks. So we could only speak to them across that wire, and some relatives, or even some friends that people had, they could not meet. Because the fear was that we'll get lost and then there'll be a problem for authorities to find or to … place them in proper places of work, as each one of us was assigned to a certain farmer, and I should also mention that we had to sign a contract for two years' farm labour on the farm, not less than forty-five dollars a month. Then we found later that nobody else paid anymore than $45.00 a month. That is with the board and room.

I found myself in Prince Albert working for one farmer, who I worked [with for] one year of time. Then, as this farmer was retiring, or on the verge of retirement, I was transferred to a different farmer, about eleven miles east of Prince Albert. After working another year for him, I was trying to bring my parents to Canada from England. My father was also serving the Polish army during the World War Two, and he remained in England. My mother and younger brother was in Africa, and after the war, they were brought to England. So the farmer I was working for signed affidavit for their arrival to Canada. So I was stuck with him for a while waiting for their arrival. They could not pass the medical or weren’t young enough to be working or to enter the labour force of this country. They could not come. So then, the knowledge of this, I left the farm and went to work in the carpentry trade in Prince Albert. I took a contract and built the first home on my own in vicinity of Prince Albert….