

From Stefan Wisniowski, Sydney, Australia

THE THORNY ROAD TO ABERCORN

By Józefa Kierkiewicz (Grzeskowiak when in Abercorn)

My father was a forester, which is why my whole family was in the first group of deportees - on February 10th, 1940 - to the Archangel Province (oblast). For a few months we lived in the Iksa settlement (Niandom district), where Ukrainians who were deported from Ukraine in 1930 were living. When the barracks being built in the deep taiga were finished, the building of the hut/shack was ended in the deeper taiga areas, Polish families were brought to this place, which designated as "Quarter 93". We were about a dozen families.

After the amnesty for Polish deportees was proclaimed, instructed by the Delegation of the Polish Embassy in Archangel, we left for the south of the Soviet Union towards the end of October 1941.

The trip from Poland to our exile had lasted two weeks and had made a deep impression on my childhood memory. The cattle wagons were jerked back and forth by the engineer so hard that one night I fell from the upper boards right onto the red-hot stove and to this day I still have the scar on my left arm. This second journey from the Siberian taiga was much longer. It took two months.

Again there were the cattle wagons, again people crammed together, but this time no guards, wagons without lead plugs but this time exhausted people, worked-out, starving, sick, dirty and lice-ridden, riding into the unknown. Those that could walk, who were more healthy when the trains stopped would gather frozen potatoes, often just peels, from which we made "soup". Oil-seed cakes, destined for animal feed, were a rarity. Water was lacking. There was no medicine. No wonder, that the death toll among the travelers was dreadfully large. On the boards above us 10 or 11 people started the journey, and only three arrived at the final station.

After two very long months, across Tashkent and Samarkand, we arrived at the regional town of Denau, near the Uzbekistan-Tadzikistan border, 100 km from Dushnabe. From Denau we made our way to a "kolkhoz" collective farm, where cotton was cultivated. After a short while Father applied to the Polish Army in Guzar. In early June 1942, as an Army family, we got a special pass for the departure to Kermine. We were counting on meeting Father there, though by then he had already moved on to the Middle East.

In Kermine which means "Valley of Death" in the Uzbek language we camped under the trees near the train station for several days. I remember perfectly the cemetery in Kermine. Thousands of Polish graves, which were virtually washed out by the wind-swept sand duness. And after all, these were graves were only a couple of months, weeks, or even just a few days old. Sand and crosses!

The saddest cemetery I have ever seen.

From Kermine we were directed to a kolkhoz near Kara-Kul. Fortunately, within two months we got on to a transport heading to Krosnovodsk. This was the last instalment of our nightmarish journey through the inhuman land.

Next was Persia, with two weeks in welcoming shelters on the beach at Pahlevi, three months in tents in the "third camp" in Teheran and half a year in the barracks stables in Ahwaz. In July 1943

we left Ahwaz for Karachi, where our transport was joined by more Poles and we went by ship to East Africa. The transport was divided into three groups. The first disembarked in Mombasa, the second in Tanga, and our group of 358 people under the leadership of J. Jakutowicz continued to the port of Dar es Salaam. Mainly we were women and children. After a quarantine period in Dar es Salaam, we continued our journey by train. It took us through the enormous African jungle to Dzub. From there, we continued by ship through the beautiful Lake Tanganyika to the little port of Mpulungu. From there, in red automobiles now only 40 km we were taken to the settlement of Abercorn. It was halfway through August 1943. A second transport to Abercorn arrived two months later, numbering about 200 people.

The settlement was built in the deep bush, in a large flat dale, about 2,000 metres above sea level. Like the other African settlements prepared for Polish refugees, Abercorn was divided into sections. Each section consisted of several clay huts with clay floors. The huts were roofed with elephant grass. They had very small windows, and instead of glass they were screened with wire mesh. Each section had its own showers, wash basins, hot water. I think that not only in Abercorn were conditions primitive, but they were heavenly compared to the lice-ridden barracks in the Archangel taiga, the Uzbek "kibiteks" or the Kazakh burrows. First of all, nobody was hungry or barefoot. The administration acted fairly. Immediately a school and preschool were organised. There was a hospital, church, community hall, post office, shop, and even a photo studio. A very important asset for the camp was a farm producing our own ham. There was also a Catholic Girls Youth Association set up by Jan Waligóra a missionary from Cracow in Africa since 15 years and continued by Father Antoni Wierzbinski, who came to Abercorn from the USA. Father Wierzbinski was actively involved in the cultural life of the camp. He was also a co-organiser of the scouts. The role of scoutmaster was played by Eugenia Kulman-Szuberla. The scouting organisation ("Hufiec") was made up of two girls' troops, one boys' troop and two troops of Cub scouts. Altogether there were 113 members. Of particular was the amateur theater, which put on a presentation of the "Rydla" puppets in the community hall, enchanting not only its own public, but also the neighbouring English farmers, for whom the presentation was repeated. One proud act of the Abercorn residents was the organisation and dispatch of packages to the prisoner of war camps and to fighting Warsaw.

At the beginning of 1944 I went with a group of 12 other youths to the High School in Kidugali [in Southern Tanganyika near Songea]. In the next school year the Abercornians were directed to the "internat" in Lusaka. [This would have either been the Dominican Convent or Lusaka Girls Scgool.] Until the very end of our stay in Africa we were going to Lusaka. And even though I only returned to Abercorn once a year for my holidays, the sentiment to my "maternal" settlement remained the most intense. There is no way to forget the white huts ranged row on row amongst the tall grasses miniscule in the huge, ancient park. And the gardens in front of the huts with their tropical flowers with splendid, intense colours, but also with Polish Dalias.

It is true that I was a bit too young to be interested in local gossip or rumours. That is probably why, when years later the book by Waclaw Korabiewicz, "Where the elephant, and where Poland" ("Gdzie slon, a gdzie Polska"), appeared I was proud to read that in Abercorn there were a number of people qualified for "Katambor".

We left Abercorn towards the end of May 1947, and waited in Mombasa for two more months for transport to Poland. We boarded the Dutch ship "Tabinta" refitted to carry troops in wartime for our journey to Genua. Waiting there for us were freight train carriages, which at first brought back

feelings of terror. In our mothers' eyes we could read the verses of the poem by Teofil Lenartowicz, "Siberian shadows" (Cieni siberyjskich):

*"They who take measure of Siberia's wasteland,
Know how small is Europe's area indeed,
For them all distance disappears
And everything becomes insignificant.
Their eternity will not be created in death
Unbounded, grey like the dark steppe;
They do not care: brightness or underground dusk
And In Hell it can't be any worse"*

Despite our worries, we safely returned to our home country on August 19th, 1947.

Abercorn Camp was closed towards the end of 1948.