

Translation of a letter by the former forced labourer Maria Andrzejewska née Kawecka, 1 December 1997, to the Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt

Memories of staying in Berlin during forced labour in the years 1942-1945

On 17 November 1942, I was taken from the tram for forced labour between Ozorków and Łódź. The tram was simply stopped between two stops. All the men were allowed to get off and the women were escorted by the Gestapo to Wólczańska Street in Łódź, where there was already a large group of women. From Wólczańska Street we were taken to Łąkowa Street, to the baths. This bath was quite unpleasant, because the staff were only men and we had to strip naked. Our clothes were taken away to be steamed. It was extremely humiliating when they searched every hairy part of our bodies for insects. The shower water was warm, but there was no soap or towels. We had to sit naked for about two hours.

From Łąkowa Street, we were taken to Kopernik Street, where we waited five days for transport in an old factory building. We sat on the bare floor. In the mornings, we were given a small loaf of bread for two people. There were no knives, so we broke the bread with our fingers. At noon, we were given barley soup, but no bowls. A farmer, who was there with her whole family, let us use a small bowl from which a dozen of us ended up eating. We ate straight from the bowl because there were no spoons.

After five days, we were taken to the Łódź-Kaliska railway station, where we boarded the train. As we said goodbye to Łódź we sang *Kto się w opiekę...* [Polish church hymn], the Polish national anthem and *Rota* [a patriotic Polish song]. We were taken to Wilhelmshagen, where we spent three days. From there we were taken by the S-Bahn to Berlin-Reinickendorf, Waldseestraße 21. We were housed in old factory halls. The floor was cement. The beds (actually plank beds) were stacked three high, the mattresses padded with sawdust. There was a grey blanket to cover them. The heating was very modest: an iron stove heated with coke. In one hall, one of these stoves was emitting carbon monoxide. Twenty poisoned, unconscious girls were taken away in an ambulance. They were all saved.

We worked in the company *Dr. Klaus Gottwart - Technische Fabrik*, Berlin SO16, Köpenicker Straße 50. We worked twelve hours a day. On Saturdays eight hours, but almost every Saturday, we had to "delouse" the mattresses. This was done under the watchful eye of our guard, who often used the phrase "you Polish pig". It was very unpleasant.

The hygienic conditions were appalling. On arrival, we were each given a bar of curd soap and a grey towel. There was a sink with hot water. But we had all either been arrested in a street raid or taken straight from work, so we had no clothes to change into. If we washed our underwear, we only had our dress to wear, or we waited wrapped in a towel for our underwear to dry. It was difficult to maintain the necessary cleanliness in these circumstances. And we felt the humiliating meaning of the expression "you Polish pig", which the guard often used. As Poles were not allowed to send parcels before Christmas, we had only this underwear for almost two months.

The food was terrible. Twice a week we were given 1kg of rye bread, 50g of margarine and either a spoonful of beetroot jam or a slice of cheese. This had to be enough for breakfast and dinner. For lunch, we had soups made from substitute products, different ones: Pearl barley soup, pea soup, cabbage soup, all watery. The worst was made from radish and savoy cabbage, with a side dish of worms. Twice a week we got meat for lunch. Hard beef, a spoonful of gravy and boiled potatoes. The tableware was made of tin.

I remember our first Christmas Eve. We had a thin cabbage soup for dinner and a biscuit for each of us. I had received a Communion wafer in the letter from my parents. About sixty girls shared the wafer, in silence and with tears in our eyes.

We travelled for an hour to get to work. We were only allowed to use the tram. But we hid our "P" badges and used the *U-Bahn* [underground train] as well, which saved us about 25 minutes. We started work at 6 a.m., so the guard woke us up at 4.30 a.m.

The factory made parts for aircraft and submarines. I worked in the technical inspection department. The wages were very low. I can't remember now, but I probably got 10 marks a month, which was very little. The girls who worked with the machines earned more; they were paid by quantity.

From the moment we arrived in Berlin in November 1942, we stayed in the hall during the air raids. There were three halls, and there were about sixty girls in each one. In the spring (probably in April), they dug a trench for us in a park. This trench was about 8 metres long, 1.5 metres wide and 1 metre deep. It was covered with branches and earth. The guards called it an "air-raid shelter". During the air raid, it was hardly possible to stay crouched down there, so we stood on the grass and looked at these beautiful "Christmas trees" dropped by the planes. We could orientate ourselves by these "Christmas trees" and knew which part of the city had been bombed.

Medical care: If one of us fell ill, she had to report it to the guard, and then she was allowed to see the doctor. All Polish women were allowed to go to the doctor's room together. Women from other factories also came here, and the doctor examined them as an exception. He would usually ask what was wrong. If she had a fever, she would get a sick note. The doctor didn't give us any prescriptions, just ready-made medicines. If the illness was more serious, she was admitted to hospital. We went to the hospital with the guard, by public transport. The hospital for Polish women was on the outskirts of Berlin. I can't remember exactly: either Annsee or Alkensee, I just know that it started with the letter "A". It was a wooden barrack. The nurses were Russian.

We spent most of our free time sightseeing in Berlin. We visited the zoo, the botanical gardens, which were very beautiful, and the other parks and districts. Poles were not allowed to enter cinemas and other places of entertainment.

Our religious life was very limited. There was a church in Reinickendorf where Holy Mass was celebrated once a month with Polish prayers.

We kept in touch with our families at home by letter. Contact with our families was broken off in December 1944.

There was no contact with German families, as this was severely punished. The Germans behaved in different ways towards us. Many of them even felt sorry for us, others were relatively polite, while there were others who were quite brutal.

In 1944, the factory was partly bombed. We and the machinery were taken to Klausdorf, where the factory owner had a brick factory. The conditions there were deplorable. We lived in a wooden hut. There was a small iron stove in each room, but we were not given any fuel. There was some wood nearby where we collected fuel. The toilet was in a wooden barn a dozen yards from the hut. The winter was harsh and even the machinery in the factory froze. There was no hot water, no air-raid shelter, and when spring came, we went under the railway bridge.

In the last few weeks, there was hardly any work in the factory. The Germans left and we went to dig trenches.

The Germans had an air-raid shelter that we were not allowed to use. I remember hiding in fear with two other girls in this air-raid shelter when the front line approached on 28 April. There was constant shelling from both sides, but after a few minutes we were discovered and thrown out. Under all this shelling, we had to find somewhere to hide. We found a hole that had been dug in the ground and we spent the whole night there. In the morning, the Russian troops arrived.

Getting home was not easy. There were no trains and we had to find another way. My comrades and I loaded the food (taken from a store, left behind by the Germans and guarded by the Russians, who allowed the Poles to take everything) onto a small trolley. In this way, we were well supplied and safe from hunger. We walked for five days, eating from these provisions. We spent the nights in the bushes, afraid to ask the Germans if we could spend the night there, and afraid of the undisciplined Russian soldiers. In this constant state of fear, we reached Frankfurt after five days. We travelled to Zbąszyń on a platform truck. In Zbąszyń, a Polish man gave us hot coffee. It was our first real drink for six days. We travelled from Zbąszyń to Poznań on open wagons. From Poznań to Łódź on a normal, overcrowded train.

After returning to Poland, I worked for a year in the State Repatriation Office in Choszczno. There I became very ill. I was unconscious for five days. The doctors said it was a severe emotional shock. After my illness, I went to Łódź. I worked at the Łódź Technical University for five years. In 1950, I married Tadeusz Andrzejewski, who had also been deported to Germany during the war. He had been taken as a forced labourer on 29 September 1939. I gave birth to two sons. When the children were older, I went back to work. Now I live alone. My husband died in 1995. I live on this pension.

My parents were forcibly resettled during the German occupation. After the war, they returned to their farm, which had been destroyed by a German, and had to start all over again. Both of them are no longer alive.

Maria Andrzejewska, née Kawecka

Daughter of Jan and Bronisława

Born on 8 September 1918 in Lewiny, Łęczyca district

Education: primary school

Trained profession: typist, print retoucher

Deported on 17 November 1942

Age at time of deportation: 24 years.