I was born in Poland on 24th July 1928 near to Chortkiv (Kopychintsy), in 1936 we moved to Ivane Puste. On 1st September 1939 Germany invaded Poland, on 17th September the Soviet Union invaded us too. 1939 was the year that set the world into flames in World War 2.

I was only a young man, but I heard conversations that my father had with his neighbours, until 1st September when it all started. In the days which followed, people were talking about Germans advancing into Poland from West, South and North. I heard them say that Krakow had fallen, Warsaw was bombed, and Gdina was under fire from German battleships. Of course we could do nothing about it, we just lived. The summer of 1939 was absolutely bone dry, there was no rain whatsoever. German tanks could speed across the fields as if on a motorway. German bombers were dropping bombs without any opposition. The German army was advancing and only very occasionally met contra attack by Polish cavalry - every time they went into battles they were decimated. Even God must have been on the German side - the horses suffered from heat, dry rivers, no grass to graze and no water to drink. But on 3rd September we heard that Britain and France declared war on Germany. The news was spreading from mouth to mouth that the British were bombing Berlin, that British and French soldiers were across the German border and people had a new enthusiasm that they were not on their own. They were hoping that Germany would retreat a lot of troops to defend their western borders.

We lived near to the Poland / Ukraine border, it had a lot of Ukrainian people. As a daily routine, I looked after the cows with our neighbours early in the morning for grazing. We used to look after the cows and play. On Sunday 17th September at about 7am, a woman, our neighbour, ran to us in the field and said “Lads and girls, go home as soon as possible. Russians have invaded Poland and will be here anytime”, so we hurried home with our cows. I told my father what I had heard and he said “Don’t be silly, go back with the cows.” We met our first Russian patrol, about three or four men. They didn’t say anything to us, we both went our opposite ways as they went to see what was going on in our estate. Then we saw more of them coming, so we turned around and went back home. By then my father had seen with his own eyes that it was true. About 150m from our house there was a roadside drinking well, and there must have been three to four hundred Russian soldiers sitting there, having their dry ration and crackers and drinking water. The weather was glorious and they were enjoying themselves. We lads went step by step closer to the soldiers. They intimated to come closer, but we were very cautious, we never accepted anything off them. After a while my mother came, she grabbed me by the hand and said "Come home, these people are Godless, they are communists." I couldn't comprehend how anyone could be Godless - they looked like us. But the word Godless registered deep in my mind, I was thinking all the way "What is Godless?" By then, it was obvious to us that Russia had invaded Poland from the East.

They marched in without any opposition, only small units of border guards, because what forces Poland had were employed on the Western front fighting Germans. By the evening we did hear some artillery fire and machine guns, from the nearest big town of Borszczow. The men gathered together and talked about the Ukrainians, who were starting to burn Polish houses, cornstacks and haystacks - we lived in fear. We didn't sleep in the house, we slept in the field, as did all families. A man came on a bike and told us some stories and rumours, everyone lived in fear. That night we were alright, we didn't meet any soldiers.

During the night we heard shots fired in Borszczow, because there was a small army unit there. The next day people passed on information that people were shot on the roof, here and there. We saw a man walking through the mist carrying a pitchfork, we ran terrified into the forest to get away from him.

For the first few days we went to school as if nothing had happened, by then Germans were advancing. Within a week, we had portraits in the class of Lenin and Stalin, we were told we had to learn the Russian alphabet. They put the emphasis on calligraphy and we had to practice the shape of Russian letters. All sorts of stories were circulating, by then we found out that nobody had bombed Berlin and that no armies were advancing from the West, it had just been wishful thinking. This was the start of the so called phony war in the West.

Right away we were short of paraffin, salt, tobacco and matches, however life went on. We had one Ukrainian friend who was very poor and had no stable employment. One day he came to our house with a rifle on his back and a red band on his left arm. He said to my father "Wozny, I want transport." My father didn't believe his eyes, he said "Kaczor, what has happened to you?" He said "Never mind, I insist that I want transport." My father said

"Where do you want to go to?" There was a town close to the Romanian border named Dniestr, my father sent my older brother, Karol, with him. As they were driving along the border he said to my brother "Why don't you run off to Romania?" Karol replied "I have to bring the horse back to my father." Karol could see that he would get shot if he did as suggested. They didn't escape and eventually returned home.

Life went on, there was constant fear of bands of Ukrainians who were really aggressive - we were like English people living in Wales. The problem of paraffin shortage and other essentials was always with us. As young lads, we could go to the Russian border through the river Zbrucz, but the weather was so dry that there was hardly any water in the river. Russian guards did not pay much attention to lads. We went to the nearest collective farm and for one egg we could buy a box of matches, which was very good because one egg in Poland cost five Groszy, and in Russia it cost a Rouble. The prices were very favourable for us, we could buy what we needed. We slept in the house, but men had to walk in groups to guard their possessions.

We came to a very fateful day, we were arrested on 10th February 1940 when I was eleven years of age. We had snow, it was winter. As normal, I got up first in the morning at about 7am to go to school. I had a cup of milk and a round of bread with butter and set out. I haven't gone thirty metres when I noticed (at that time the morning was dead still) lots of horses and sledges, and movement in general amongst Russian soldiers. I went back to my house and told my father that I saw lots of horses, and soldiers and sleighs. Again, my father got up, scratched the frost from the windows and said "They are going to deport us."

We saw our neighbours being transported to the nearest railway station, which was about 3km away, we didn't know when our turn would be. After an hour, two soldiers moved in and said to my father "Do you have any arms?" Of course we didn't have any. They made a basic check of the house and concluded that my father was speaking the truth. They told us that we had half an hour to get ready, and we were not to take anything with us because where we were going there was plenty of everything. We thought of the cold and frost there, so it was difficult to decide what to take. We had a few loaves of bread, which mother had made earlier and some smoked bacon from when father had killed a pig a couple of months earlier. We were confused, we couldn't comprehend what was happening, where we were going, why? What about the chickens and pigs, dogs, horses? Karol complained about the dog, mother said “Either you or the dog.”

We fed the horses. We got on the sleigh and went to this nearest station, Ivane Puste, where we saw one hundred wagons (cattle trucks) waiting for us. We came to one wagon, we stopped and they opened the door, saying “Get in.” Father (Antoni), mother (Emelia), Karol, me, Veronica, Francis and Ken. They were already full of people who had been there for some hours. It was dark in the wagons, there was only light only light from gaps in wooden walls. When there were perhaps fifty people in the truck, they shut the door and we were completely in the darkness. We noticed that our neighbours were there. Each family had a little bit of space to put their belongings, blankets, quilts, pillows, sacks of plates, utensils, etc. We still had no idea what was happening or where we were going. The frost was severe.

The Russians were running up and down shouting, and opening and closing doors. There was no light whatsoever in the wagons, so children were screaming. People were begging the soldiers to open the door, but they kept fobbing us off. People shouted for food, they had eaten what they had taken, but it ran out – the Russians gave us no food. We found that for the whole wagon, there was a small iron fire with a pipe. There was no coal and no water. To this day I still don’t know how we managed, how we survived. We stayed all night in the wagon, then in the morning they allowed two men from each wagon to take two buckets of soup. Our toilet was a hole in the corner of the wagon in the floor. There would be as many as fifty people in each wagon. There were some boards in the wagon at head height where people could sleep, this tended to be old folk and babies. We remained locked in the wagon for three days and nights before moving, they kept filling up all the transports. None of my family left the wagon once during this period. The frost was terrible, 1940 was hardest winter for many years.

We went north and after two days arrived at Husiatyn, where they changed train for a Russian gauge train. The night was cold, snow was rock hard and frost was unbelievable. We travelled for about six weeks on the train. The train was standing for hours on small stations, sometimes all day. Each time we came to bigger towns, the Russians would allow four men from each train to collect soup in buckets for the wagons. On the second day of travel into Russian country a neighbour died, she was in her eighties. We kept hammering on the doors to advise that a woman has died, but they just ignored us. After four or five days we got her moved from the wagon.

On the fourth week of the journey we were stopped and asked if we wanted a wash. I went with my father, as the building was dark. I was given a towel and a soap bar which was brown. I thought it was chocolate and I had a deep bite, the taste of soap lingered for hours.

We eventually arrived in the city of Novosibirsk in Siberia, then changed for narrow gauge for the final part of the journey to Tal'menka. We went on local (forest) train for twenty hours to Tal'menka in a deep forest.

We were taken on horse driven sleighs to barracks for eight hundred people. Each barrack (log cabin) was partitioned into small family rooms, each family had one room. There would be one fire between two rooms, for cooking and eating. The weather was bitterly cold. The next day we were registered by the NKVD. Those classified as workers were told to go to the nearest sawmill. There they were segregated, and most were told to go into the forest equipped with axes and saws. Under a chargehand, they were told to fell trees. Some were taken to another camp and worked in the sawmills, some were employed for carrying railway sleepers onto the wagons. Veronica got a job wheeling sawdust in barrows to massive, giant heaps. Francis was digging railway tracks with spades. Karol and father were felling trees in a group of twenty men. Ken and I were under-age to work in the winter, mother was not required to work.

Workers were paid very poorly. Every working person was getting six hundred grams of bread, non-workers two hundred grams of bread. Working people had to wake at 6am and walk for about two miles to the nearest works kitchen. They were given a plate of soup called Lapsza, made of two or three flakes of pastry. They then marched into the forest and were assigned to the various teams which were waiting to start work. At lunchtime, staff brought another plate of soup. At 5pm, everyone had to walk back to the barracks.

The bread that was allowed used to come every early evening. Workers had a green ration card, non-workers had a brown ration card. In late spring, the snow thawed and greenery came to life.