

## REVIEW

# Window to Freedom tells story of a survivor

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While it can seem that way, history is not documented by writers who have a magical view from far above. It is, instead, a result of the meticulous collection of details that are often related by people who were closely involved in the action.

*Window to Freedom: A Journey of Survival*, is a marvelous example of just such a source. In his recently released memoir, former Boswell resident Marian Wiacek tracks his experience as a Polish boy whose family is first deported from their homeland and then pushed into a bewildering odyssey that would take them into Asia and Africa and the Middle East before the Second World War came to a close.

Drawing on diaries he kept as a child, a keen eye for detail and his remarkable memory, Wiacek's descriptions, and a sparkling array of rare photographs, pull the reader into an unfamiliar and uncomfortable world.

Wiacek was just 10 years of age in 1940 when Soviet soldiers arrived to herd him, his mother, eight-year-old brother and five-year-old sister into a train of cattle wagons destined for Russia. His father had already been arrested and it would be years before his fate became known. (He was one of thousands of Polish soldiers captured and murdered by the Soviet army.)

As the oldest child, even at 10, young Marian took his responsibilities seriously. After a torturous two-week winter train ride, with as many as 70 people crowded into each cattle wagon, which featured a hole in the floor serving as the toilet, the prisoners — arrested for no reason other than being Polish — disembarked to a labour camp. Marian quickly became an adventurous and creative contributor. His mother, who had been comfortably ensconced in the Polish upper middle class only days earlier, worked as a logging laborer, and Marian ventured into the woods. There he put to use his enormous store of common sense and knowledge gained from mushroom-picking expeditions near his former home to good use. Soon, he was gathering mushrooms and berries and using rudimentary fishing poles and lines to catch fish. In short order he was drying mushrooms and selling them to others to help supplement the family's meager income as members suffered from illnesses common to those who live in poverty. His entrepreneurial bent would continue to serve him well throughout the war.

Astonishing in its detail is an up close and personal recollection of one boy's wartime life in wartime. Wiacek's family was

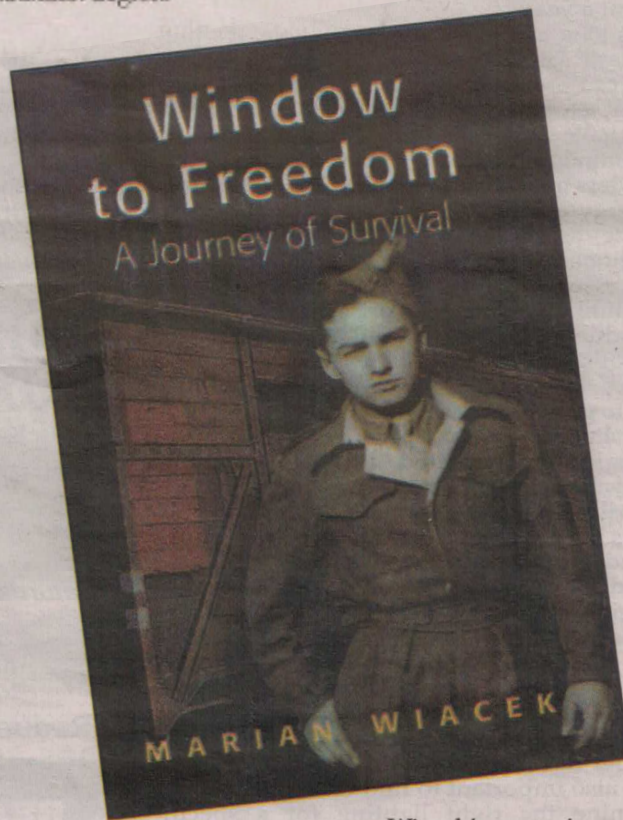


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Marian Wiacek (left), then 81, and Frank Dreksler in a June 12, 2011, ceremony in which they received the Siberian Cross at the Royal Canadian Legion.

among as many as two million Poles who were captured and imprisoned in labour camps in Siberia and other Soviet Union locations. In 2011, he was awarded the Siberian Cross, recognizing enforced Polish deportations, in a ceremony at Creston's Royal Canadian Legion.

as a Polish soldier, living in Palestine and attending a mechanical high school. In 1947, he made his way to England, where he found work and was able to bring his other family members from East Africa.



The story takes an unexpected turn in 1941, when Poland becomes a Russian ally as a result of the German invasion. Technically freed and no longer considered prisoners, the Wiacek family is once again on the move, but at the mercy of armies and bureaucrats in a world deep in conflict. A month-long train trip southward, with food scarce and illness rampant, takes them to another camp, where work in the cotton fields provides meager sustenance. In 1942 the Polish army organizes their travel by ship to Iran and, eventually, Uganda.

By the end of the war, Wiacek was preparing for life

Wiacek's memoir makes for a satisfying reading experience, providing day-to-day details of his life and putting them into the context of a world at war. *Window to Freedom* was edited by Luanne Armstrong and Betsy Brierley, and the book's cover and interior design are the work of Boswell's Warren Clark.

Armstrong commends the book as "of interest to anyone of Polish heritage, to scholars of World War Two, to fans of great non-fiction, and to interest readers internationally."

*Window to Freedom* is available in Creston at Kingfisher Used Books or it can be ordered from Marian Wiacek, for \$25 at 1453 Farrell Avenue, Delta, BC, V4L 1V3 or at mardanwia@gmail.com.