

Leon Lifsches In Military Uniform



This is a picture of me, wearing the military uniform of the 1st Kosciuszko Infantry Division. The photo was taken in Moscow in 1943.

Before the outbreak of the German-Soviet war, I was enlisted in the Red Army, and Iziek was called up for the so called reserve drill. And there war met us and we didn't return home, becoming, as you call it, front-liners instead. I served on the Ukrainian front and there we were demobilized and sent away – we were to join the Anders' army. All those who came from Western Ukraine were demobilized with us, as 'unreliable element.' That was early 1942.

We were enlisted in the work battalions, the so called 'stroybats' [Russian stroityelniy battalion – construction battalion]. They told us we would join the Anders' army and instead we found ourselves in Novosibirsk as stroybat members, building a metallurgical plant at minus 40 degrees Celsius. And there, a group of 200 soldiers, we mutinied and organized a strike.

Among us was Lucjan Szenwald, I remember, he was a famous writer. We refused to go to work. A district military prosecutor came and, surprisingly, asked us what we wanted, so we said we were professionals and had nothing against working in the stroybats – but in our professions. To our surprise, 24 hours later the military prosecutor personally arrived with some buses and those buses took us to boarding houses where we were given jobs consistent with our professions. And that was an episode that could have well ended tragically.

Iziek was still on the front, somewhere near Moscow. And from there, he was also sent to the trudarmia, to Tashkent. We met many of our friends in Novosibirsk. One was a guy named

Sternlicht, from Bielsko, his wife worked in the canteen, gave us some extra food, and it was there I learned that my three brothers, Michal, Henryk, and Iziek, were in Tashkent.

It was 1942. And so, illegally, me and a whole group of people, we hopped on a train carrying Polish soldiers released from camps, and we rode towards the Anders' army, towards Tashkent. Eventually I found myself in a place near Bukhara where they told us to pull our pants down and said, 'about turn!' End of story, they checked whether we were circumcised. By that time, Jews were no longer admitted into the Anders' army.

Some people went to Fergana, me and some other people went to Tashkent, but my brother Henryk was no longer there, having left with the Anders' army. Michal lived in the Kyrgyz Republic, worked in a kolkhoz. I got a job in Tashkent as a dyer in a cooperative, Iziek worked in a state textile factory, also in Tashkent. We lived in an Uzbek quarter, called Barkhan, with a Russian lady who had also been evacuated, in very primitive conditions.

We received support from the MOPR Central Committee. There was a large group of Jews in Tashkent at the time, several hundred people. Tashkent had a sizeable Jewish minority in itself, plus there were many of us, the émigrés. We were a large, strong communist group, kind of affiliated with the MOPR Central Committee. The party itself had been banned.

We were in Tashkent until 12th May 1943, after which date we left the city to join the 1st Division. Me and Iziek fought in the Battle of Lenino, and my brother was killed virtually a couple of steps away from me.

I was the second in command of the regiment's medical company. I personally took part in taking wounded soldiers away from the front line under enemy fire. During one such excursion to the front line I was heavily wounded. I went through several hospitals between October and May, and eventually found myself in a Polish hospital in Moscow, where I underwent the final surgery.

After being released from the hospital, I was sent back to the front, to the headquarters, in Lutsk, Ukraine, and from there I went with the army as an officer, already wounded in battle, with the back units. I took part in the liberation of Lublin, and then in the liberation of Warsaw.