

Mieczyslaw Najman In The Polish Army Training Camp In The USSR



This is my picture from the Polish Military training camp in Syeltse on Oka, near Ryazan. A friend from the army gave me this photograph; he says that on that picture I'm standing second from left in the upper row, but I don't really recognize myself. The year 1943, word came a Polish army was being organized, the Berling Army. Somehow we got to Moscow. How, what way, I don't remember. There were several of us because some Russian officer said, 'Your army is mobilizing itself.' And that's it, but how to get there? Some Russian says he goes there by car. 'We'll take you to Syeltse. I'll give you a lift, we'll stop one of our trucks on the road and I'll tell them to take you further. On your way, our kolkhozes will be obliged to feed you.' We eventually reached Syeltse on the Oka. A huge camp, thousands of people. They had released prisoners, all those Poles, from the forced labor camps in Siberia. They had legs wrapped up in rags, a sorry sight. I looked at those people and said to myself, 'Instead of putting them in hospital and giving them treatment, they are training them to send them to the front.' Those people were wasted by starvation, by misery, by everything. Some were frostbitten. And so they took us for a week or a month. They taught us the drill, how to care for your gun, how to clean the barrel, all the things a soldier needs to know. It was Syeltse on the Oka. We had training in the fields, learned to fold the overcoats, the rucksack, stabbing the straw with the pin bayonet, pecking at it? There were those straw dummies, we stabbed them with bayonets? Shooting at the trees, we had shooting targets, just for fun. We were there for three weeks and the 1st division already went to the front. We stayed in the second one, 2nd Henryk Dabrowski Infantry Division because it had not yet reached its planned size, and then to the front. And we started moving westwards. I found myself in the 2nd division, 4th regiment anti-tank artillery, a 76-mm battery. About seventy people in the battery. There were many Jews in my battery. Some had been deported to Russia, others fled from the Germans. There were many, many officers, generals - highly experienced, very intelligent - for who got deported to Russia? Rich people, and the rich had the money to pay for education those were learned people. I had a guy named Liebert as a neighbor. Spoke seven languages so they immediately made him a political officer, he was the commander. He was with me in the military. A very delicate, very intelligent man. There was also an acquaintance of mine from Drohobycz, Lojfter, the school headmaster's

son, the second in command of a 4th regiment unit. And the pre-war officers all said they were just private soldiers. They concealed the fact they were officers because the Russkies spied. Every fifth day or every week they told us to undress, checked what we had in our pockets, whether we weren't spies. Called you for an interrogation.