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## **Women-Soldiers of the Home Army in the Soviet Forced-Labour Camps of Vorkuta in 1944–1956**

He told me, “We won’t kill you, we’ll send you where you’ll want to die but won’t be able to.”<sup>1</sup>

Vorkuta is a town situated above the Polar Circle, more than two thousand kilometres from Moscow. In the early 1940s, it became one of the largest camp centres of the Gulag system. Owing to the rich deposits of bituminous coal, in a very short time the whole Vorkuta region was transformed into a significant industrial district with a growing number of sub-camps.<sup>2</sup> However, it was only the beginning of the war with Nazi Germany and the occupation of the Donets Basin by the enemy that solidified the position of Vorkuta as one of the most important forced-labour camps in the whole system. The development of the labour camps of Vorkuta led to a dramatic increase in the number of prisoners there. The main work carried out in Vorkuta were coal mining and a range of tasks associated with the maintenance of the great Vorkutlag combine.<sup>3</sup> After

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<sup>1</sup> The KARTA Center (Pol. *Ośrodek KARTA*), the Eastern Archive (Pol. *Archiwum Wschodnie*, further referred to as AW), AWI/56, Janina Borzdyńska, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> Vorkutsky ITL, Vorkutsko-Pechosky ITL, Vorkutlag, Vorkutustroy, established in 1938 in the place of Ukhtpechlag as a result of the reorganisation and division of production directions. Its main specialty was the extraction of coal and general labour improving the operation of the “Vorkutaugol” combine. In the ITLs of Vorkuta, prisoners of the *katorzhnik* category were held; see: Łagry: *Przewodnik encyklopedyczny* [Labour camps: An encyclopaedic guide book], ed. By N. Ochotna and A. Rogiński, Wydawnictwo Ośrodka Karta, Warszawa 1998, pp. 531-532.

<sup>3</sup> S. Sigaczow, “Łagry OGPU-NKWD-MWD ZSRR w regionie workuckim” [OGPU-NKWD-MVD of USSR labour camps in the Vorkuta region], in: *Więźniowie łagrów w rejonie Workuty* [Labour camp prisoners in the Vorkuta region], part 2, *Alfabetyczny wykaz 5690 Polaków i obywateli polskich innych narodowości aresztowanych po 4 stycznia 1944, więzionych*

World War II, the Vorkuta forced-labour camps, characterised by extremely hostile atmospheric conditions, became the place of destination for many Poles fighting in the ranks of the Home Army (Pol. *Armia Krajowa*—AK) and convicted by Soviet tribunals as “traitors to the homeland.” In the discussed period of 1944–1956, there were about 5,700 Poles detained in Vorkuta, of whom slightly more than 11% were women.<sup>4</sup> A vast majority of Poles-prisoners of Vorkuta were members of the Home Army during the war and it was due to this allegiance that they received long terms and the additional *katorzhnik* [hard labour—T.N.] category, which meant they were automatically assigned to the most difficult and dangerous labours.

The aim of this article is to present what the labour-camp reality was like in the eyes of women, members of the Home Army and prisoners of Vorkuta, held in the forced-labour camps after the end of World War II. In order to achieve this goal, the author used mainly the archival sources available at the Eastern Archive of the KARTA Center in Warsaw. On the Polish publishing market, the memoirs of women-prisoners of Vorkuta forced-labour camps in broader circulation are scarce. Most of the printed accounts have been self-published by the authors, which severely limited the number of copies printed. It should also be mentioned that it was usually men who undertook the writing of memories in order to publish them. The Eastern Archive has a large collection of accounts of victims of oppression; however, only 9 of them belong to women prisoners of Vorkuta. The memories available in the archive are quite distinctive and alike one another in the interpretation of their structure. They are often the records of memories received or collected by the employees of the archive. They are not extensive and, in general, the authors touch upon and avoid similar subjects.

The mass scale arrests of the AK members by the NKVD began in 1944. The findings made by Marcin Zwolski indicate that the greatest number of arrested people came from the territory of former Kresy.<sup>5</sup> Women, just

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w *Workutlagu, Rieczłagu, Inłagu, Mintagu, Obskim ITŁ i Budowie 501 oraz innych łagrach podległych Północnemu Zarządowi Budowy Kolei* [Alphabetic list of Poles and Polish citizens of other nationalities arrested after 4 January 1944, imprisoned in Vorkutlag, Rechlag, Inlag, Minlag, Obsky ITL and Construction 501, and other labour camps belonging to the Northern Railway Construction Authority], ed. by A. Dzieńkiewiczowa, A. Gurjanowa, Wydawnictwo Ośrodka Karta, Warszawa 2001, pp. 20-21

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> M. Zwolski, “Represje wobec ludności cywilnej po wkroczeniu Armii Czerwonej w latach 1944–1945” [Repressions against the civilian population after the arrival of the Red Army in 1944–1945], in: *Polska 1939–1945. Straty osobowe i ofiary represji pod dwiema okupacjami* [Poland 1939–1945: Human losses and victims of repression under both occupations], ed. By W. Materski, T. Szarota, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej, Warszawa 2009, pp. 273-278.

like men, were subjected to investigation. Some of them remember that the interrogators did not beat them but rather used psychological terror and tried to break the interrogated women by questioning them for many hours at night. There are also the accounts of the AK couriers, mentioning they were beaten due to their function, associated with carrying weapons, correspondence, and transport of people.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to explicitly state, however, what it was exactly that determined the method of questioning chosen by the investigator.

As soon as the prosecutor decided that the “proofs of guilt” gathered during the proceedings were sufficient, the show of Soviet justice ensued. The participation in a court hearing gave the opportunity to learn who else had been arrested. All girls convicted of being members of the AK were usually pronounced fascists and collaborators of Nazi Germany, and thus sentenced to between 10 and even 25 years of hard labour.<sup>7</sup> After the sentence, the only thing left was waiting. Many women were convicted when the war was already over, which gave them some hope of being released, since they were Polish citizens and considered themselves as such. The Soviet authorities, however, treated them as Soviet citizens, and the communist government being formed in Poland was quite eager to get rid of unwanted elements which could destabilise its power.<sup>8</sup>

The starting point of the ‘stage’ was extremely difficult for each of the convicts. Since then, an entirely new chapter in their lives began for the women prisoners. They were thrown into a world that was governed by its own laws and was a complete contradiction of their lives so far. In this situation, the

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<sup>6</sup>AW, AWI/799a, Stanisława Szpuła, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>The sentences were passed according to the penal code of the Russian FSSR, and the AK members had the notorious Article 58, which pertained among others to the treason against the homeland, collaboration, military action against the USSR. In addition, every fifth convict was tried based on the Decree of 19 April 1943, which also contributed to such a large number of members of the AK sentenced to the hardest labour; in: *Więźniowie łagrów...*, part 2, pp. 10-16.

<sup>8</sup>The Soviet authorities considered Poles living in the Eastern territories as Soviet citizens since on 2 November 1939 the Supreme Soviet of the USSR passed a resolution that formally sanctioned the allegiance of Polish territories to the Ukrainian and Belarussian SSRs. This decision stripped the Poles living in these territories of Polish citizenship and subjected them to Soviet jurisdiction. The situation of the inhabitants of Vilnius was different, as they lost Polish citizenship in August 1940, when the Soviets proclaimed the establishment of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic; see: M. Kallas, *Historia ustroju Polski X-XX w.* [History of the political system in Poland 10th-20th centuries], Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1999, pp. 363-364; L. Tomaszewski, *Wileńszczyzna lat wojny i okupacji 1939-1945* [The Vilnius Region in the years of war and occupation], Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm, Warszawa 2010, pp. 116-119.

moments of despair suffered by the convicts are not surprising, like in the case of Stanisława Szpuła, who went 'to transport' on the Christmas Eve of 1945:

I fell, I said, "I won't go, kill me, I won't, I'd rather die here." Then an NKVD guard leapt at me and hit me several times with the stock [of his gun]. And these ladies, Polish, who walked behind me—he would kill me, and for me it didn't matter at all—they took hold my arms and simply pulled me along. And they started to ask me, listen, what are you doing, we may survive, how can you... Somehow, they reassured me and I went on then.<sup>9</sup>

Already during the stay in prisons, a special bond was established between the Polish women who belonged to the AK. They strived to help one another, lend support in the moments of weakness. This bond held during the stages, and further developed while they were held in each of the sub-camps and labour camps.

Polish women came to the labour camps as political prisoners. This classification, from the very moment they stepped through the camp gates, set them up as losers compared to the prisoners with criminal categories. In forced-labour camps, this was of utmost importance. The criminal prisoners were the masters of life and death there, and in many cases the camp authorities could not do anything even when they wanted to help the political prisoners.

Then I was sent via a special stage to katorga [hard labour], so far it was a prison camp, but it wasn't hard labour. Vorkuta, that was hard labour...<sup>10</sup>

As it was mentioned above, Vorkuta was a hard labour camp characterised not only by extremely hostile atmospheric conditions but also very hard work done every day by the prisoners. There was no separate work for men and women. The norms set by the 'management' of the camp were the same for the prisoners of both sexes. The same rule applied to food. Shifts were usually 10 hours long, but formalities like counting and awaiting all the brigades often stretched it to 14 hours. One of the main items in the accounts available in the Eastern Archive, the description of the works performed in Vorkuta. The descriptions are often very thorough and focus on the details of the works, even though there are some accounts which only briefly list the activities to which women were sent.

The girls from the Home Army were assigned a variety of works. Usually, however, they were sent to the so-called hard labour, due to their katorzhnik category. Sometimes, newly arrived friends were placed in the same brigade, which made starting a new life a bit easier. Wanda Kiałka recalls that after

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<sup>9</sup>AW, AWI/799a, Stanisława Szpuła, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup>AW, AWI/848, Stefania Szantyr-Powolna, p. 25.

arriving at Vorkuta she was sent to work in the coal mines, and her friend Hanna Szyszkówna did not want to leave her alone, even though she was assigned lighter work on the surface, which gave her better chances of survival. Both couriers were put in a brigade which worked on the face and loaded mine carts with coal. It was an exceptionally hard work, and the girls could only hold the shovels in their hands with difficulty. In addition, the condition inside the mine were horrible: not to mention the continuous threat of a possible rock burst, people worked there in an awfully humid atmosphere. The clothes the women were given were much too big for them and, at the same time, they very soon became soaked with humidity and heavy.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from working in the mines, women were also assigned to snow-clearing brigades. Often it was the weakest women prisoners were sent to such brigades. In Vorkuta, snow lies for 9 months a year and the work with it virtually never ends. Among their main tasks, therefore, was clearing the railway tracks, which had to be tidied up fast after each *purga*,<sup>12</sup> so that the trains carrying gravel and wood to Vorkuta could pass. Obviously, the trains were running all the time and any thought of a standstill in the supply of raw materials was unthinkable. This work was exceptionally onerous for exhausted women, especially since the snow was so hard it had to be split with pickaxes. Consequently, the women prisoners tried to dig as narrow tunnels as it was possible to decrease the amount of work. Alas, such actions could lead to accidents in which prisoners were pulled under the wheels of passing trains. This was the case of Stefania Szantyr-Powolna's forewoman, whose skirt became caught on some part of a steam engine: the woman was dragged several hundred metres and died due to having hit a railroad switch with her head. Since train drivers did not slow down when passing working prisoners, in cases like the above, the body was often dragged until it detached by itself or the train stopped.<sup>13</sup> Hanna Szyszko, who was also transferred to a brigade clearing snow from railway tracks, enjoyed a remarkable amount of luck. While working, she was caught by a passing train but managed to detach herself from it relatively quickly and by doing so she survived, just bruised.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> AW, AWI/337, Wanda Kiałka, pp. 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> *Purga* is a regional name for a very strong and freezing wind combined with abundant snowfall, which affects northern Russia. One may infer from the memories of the prisoners, that the snowdrifts left after a purge could be several metres high.

<sup>13</sup> AW, AWI/848I, Stefania Szantyr-Powolna, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> AW, AWI/337, Wanda Kiałka, p. 22.

Other occupations of women in exile included construction and repair work, and the work at unloading platforms. The quotas to be filled were exorbitant and often even healthy men did not have enough strength to meet them. Frequently, women were unable to hold the tools, so it could happen that two of them worked with a single hammer or pickaxe.

Some of the harder work done by women took place at the brickyard, to which the Women's Sub-camp 7 was assigned. The women prisoners who worked at taking bricks out of the kilns were often burned, since the supervisors wanted to save time and money, and did not wait for the kilns to cool down but rather ordered the prisoners to empty them of freshly fired bricks.<sup>15</sup>

Because of the appalling working conditions and quotas which were impossible to meet, women soon lost their strength. Moreover, the food rations depended on filling the quotas, were much too short, and lacked any vitamins or necessary minerals, which affected the behaviour of many women. Many Russian women decided to take the "easy bread." According to the accounts available at the Eastern Archive, such behaviour was rather unheard of among the Poles. Chiefly, because the "blatnoy"<sup>16</sup> showed more respect to them than to the Ukrainian and Russian women, which was noticed even by the Poles. Apart from that, older women tried to keep an eye on younger girls and support them in their moments of doubt.<sup>17</sup> The passage above may seem controversial to many students of the subject, since the published memories of the prisoners from other camps include information about Polish women who were prostitutes, e.g. in Barbara Skarga or Gustaw Herling Grudziński. Thus a question arises, why such descriptions are absent from the accounts of prisoners of Vorkuta. The causes of such a phenomenon can be many. First, perhaps in Vorkuta such situations were actually did not occur, and this is why this subject is passed over in the memoirs or just marginally mentioned. Second, the reason may be an attempt to hide uncomfortable, shameful memories. It requires a great deal of civil courage to acknowledge the deeds, not necessarily heroic, one's own or done by one's colleagues, particularly in a situation where people were faced with truly

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<sup>15</sup>T. Pawłowska, *Moje powojenne łagry. Czuzhga, Workuta, Poćma 1945–1956* [My post-war labour camps: Chuzhga, Vorkuta, Pochma 1945–1956], Wydawnictwo Diecezji Gdańskiej "Stella Maris," Gdańsk 1992, pp. 64–66.

<sup>16</sup>There were two categories of criminal prisoners in the forced-labour camps. "Suki" were the prisoners who decided to collaborate with the authorities and in return received better posts and extra food rations, whereas the "blatnoy" despised the prison authorities and usually did not go out to work at all.

<sup>17</sup>AW, AWI/169, Maria Furmaniak-Żurek, pp. 40–41; AW, AWI/848, Stefania Szantyr-Powolna, pp. 39–40.

extreme conditions. A contemporary reader may also wonder at the fact that prostitution was not referred to directly but euphemistically replaced by “taking the easy bread.” This fact may be explained by the social background or the women who, coming from good families, had not been exposed to such vocabulary. For the authors of all the account used in this article, the violence of the camp language was unprecedented. On the other hand, avoiding to use any direct references to the sexual sphere may have been an attempt to place oneself above those women who nevertheless agreed to become prostitutes.

The considerations aside whether or not Polish women decided to sell their bodies for bread or not, it is beyond doubt they were not entirely safe in the labour camps. At each and every step, women had to be on guard lest they offended some “blatnoy” or accepted anything from him, because he could then demand “everything” in return. This was a problem Hanna Szyszko had. During her stay in the labour camp she made friends not only with Wanda Kaiłka but also with three other Polish women, who were members of the AK. Initially, they remained in the same labour camp and so tried to help one another. Thanks to their colleague, Czesława “Krystyna” Hnatów, they made contact with Polish women from a neighbouring mine. The women started to play a dangerous game of sending secret messages to one another, which was, of course, forbidden, since the prisoners were not allowed to maintain contact between the camps. They attempted to deliver the messages through various channels, and it was one such short message that became the source of Hanna’s many troubles. This event was described in detail by Bernard Grzywacz, her later husband and the author of the letter because of which she ran into serious trouble:<sup>18</sup>

With Hanka, who gave me a minuscule bear for Easter, an and even smaller Easter chick-ling she made at the cost of her sleep, I quickly lost contact. She was sent to Mine 18. It was only once that I managed to pass anything to her there—a medallion I made of duralumin. It was carried by a Volga German, who brought me back the response on a piece of paper torn off a bag of cement. My message and gift nearly caused a disaster. The German, unaware of the danger, handed the message to a bloke, who thought he deserved something in return for the favour. For the whole time Hanka spent at Mine 18, he never left her alone and turned her life into a veritable hell.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> B. Grzywacz, *Krąg Workuty* [The Vorkuta circle], Archiwum Wschodnie, Warszawa 2004, pp. 123-124.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.



The “blatnoy” were not the only danger for the Polish women, as female criminal prisoners were a match to their male colleagues in violence and cruelty. They robbed, beat, and tormented the political prisoners. There was hardly anything the latter could do with it. Oftentimes, the only thing left to them was to cry. However, there were situations in which even the “blatnoy” helped, expecting nothing in return.

I remember at one point, when I arrived at the camp, I had some supplies ... —a lot of hard tacks, lard, underwear, my own warm clothes. In the space of one or two days in the camp, all of it was stolen, and I was left naked. We were given camp clothes, but, the underwear. I remember my bitter tears when my last knickers were stolen, it just seemed the whole world fell upon my head. ... I’m sitting and crying loudly. One blatnaya comes, she must have taken pity on me, somehow, and asks, why’re you crying for? See, I’ve just arrived, got everything stolen, don’t have anything left at all. What’re you in for? I started to talk. Don’t worry, Natasha, soon all’ll be back. Indeed, as soon as they got back from work, and she was the ringleader and all, and didn’t work, she called those blatnye of hers and asked where Natasha’s things were. I had everything brought back to me. It made my hair stand on end when she came to me. You must remember that such protection did not always pay off, since she could demand anything afterwards, for one thing, she could tell me to steal something or kill someone, and if I did not, she would do me in.<sup>20</sup>

Because of the crippling work, awful food, and the lack of any sanitary facilities, sooner or later Polish women were put in camp hospitals. There were instances in which the prisoners went right from the transport to a field hospital, in an attempt to make them more or less recover so that they could begin to work. Because of the lack of most basic medicines, scurvy, typhoid, or even flu could result in death of a prisoner. What is more, the ubiquitous lice and nits were a major problem:

And such terrible, big lice; unlike the regular lice. And all a human had time for was to take it off yourself and wring out the lice, and hair, we kept it in a single braid for the nits, there was no hygiene. Flesh so much torn and scratched that it swelled.<sup>21</sup>

In Soviet forced-labour camps, one could see many thoroughly exhausted prisoners who had no reflexes left but a desperate search for food. Such a person was called a “dokhodziaga.”<sup>22</sup> Famine and hard labour made the prisoner lose

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<sup>20</sup> AW, AWI/916, Natalia Zarzycka, pp. 10-11.

<sup>21</sup> AW, AWI/799a, Stanisława Szpuła, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> The word “dokhodziaga” refers to completely exhausted people. By the accounts of labour camp prisoners, it was short for “came to communism” (Rus. *doshol do komunizma*); in:



their sense of dignity and stripped them of all but the most basic needs. The “dokhodziagas” laid bare the whole bestiality of the system of labour camps in the USSR. In order to survive, a human being who fell into that state had to be very lucky and meet someone who decided to help him or her in that savage world.<sup>23</sup> Very often the incessant gnawing hunger and terrible conditions led people to the extreme. In moments of despair, the desire to survive gave way to the wish to end the hard labour to which the prisoner was condemned. What is surprising in this situation is that it was men who committed suicides more often. It might seem as well that the hardships of labour, malnutrition, and inhuman treatment were easier to bear for women. At the same time, it is necessary to make a distinction between the suicide attempts made by criminal prisoners in order to be transferred to a better post or to stay longer in a hospital and those made by political prisoners, who usually wanted to end their lives.

The Poles in the labour camps tried to help one another to survive their time of imprisonment. Whoever could, tried to organise lighter work for his or her colleagues. It was thanks to such connections that Natalia Zarzycka was placed in a tailor workshop, where she learned to sew on a machine.<sup>24</sup> Similar skills also made survival in the camp easier. Darning someone’s shirt could gain you an extra slice of bread or some tobacco.<sup>25</sup> The mutual help was not limited to finding good work. People tried to spend holidays together, especially the Christmas Eve. Each of the women prisoners took care to set aside some food so that they could then have a holiday together with their friends and sing Christmas carols.<sup>26</sup> Another reason to celebrate was receiving a parcel. Whenever a prisoner received a parcel, she invited her friends to the barrack and a ‘feast’ ensued. Unfortunately, the parcels were not delivered to the prisoners intact, as they were often stolen. Moreover, not every prisoner would receive such a gift from her or his family. This is what makes it even more remarkable that the parents of Natalia Zarzycka, who wa imprisoned in Vorkuta together with her brother, made it a point to regularly send parcels to the siblings.

That I survived, that I still live in relative health, I owe to my parents alone. They stinted themselves but sent parcels regularly, and not just to me. If I wrote them that some he or she needed help, they organised parcels

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AW, AWI/174, Stanisław Duźniak.

<sup>23</sup> E. Stefanowicz, *Los tak chciał. 11 lat w wiecznej zmarzlinie* [Fate willed it: 11 years in permafrost], Wydawnictwo Tukan Remy s.c., Piotrków Trybunalski 1997, p. 86.

<sup>24</sup> AW, AWI/916, Natalia Zarzycka, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> AW, AWI/337, Wanda Kiałka, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> AW, AWI/888, Maria Wolf, p. 15.

for everyone and sent them. There were not limits of how many parcels you could receive. Parcels arrived; of course, there was thievery. There were so-called *kaptiorkas*—when I got a parcel, I had to leave some of it in a *kaptiorka*—it was a bit like a depository. You could collect some of it every day, but all you collected was leftovers. So we made a deal with the man who was at the *kaptiorka*: he got his share, and we took the whole parcel at once. Back in the barrack, we threw two beautiful parties, invited all the Poles, ate two good suppers, and then went back to living small.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, those Poles who showed no inclination to help their compatriots were perceived rather negatively. In Vorkuta, not helping your own, your fellow countrymen—Poles—was often seen as a kind of selling oneself, and most likely the situation in other camp units was similar. In the memoirs, the reception of such behaviour by the authors is not positive, more often the reader may notice a certain disappointment that instead of supporting one another, some of them helped Lithuanians, Estonians, Ukrainians, or Russians.

All through the 1940s and in the early 1950s, the situation of hard labour (*katorzhnik*) prisoners in Vorkuta was difficult; in 1948 special regime camps were established, in which the majority of Poles were gathered, from other labour camps as well. The prisoners had to wear numbers on their clothes, the barracks where they slept were locked for the night, and the windows were barred. It was the time when German prisoners were beginning to be released, while Poles still remained in the camps. Commencing 1953, everything changed. In March, the camp authorities showed to all prisoners the announcement that Joseph Stalin, the leader of the Soviet Union, was dead. After his 30-year long “reign,” the tyrant, whom the majority of the prisoners hated, was no more. The reactions of *zeks*<sup>28</sup> to the message about Stalin’s death accurately represent the attitudes towards the government among the representatives of different nationalities imprisoned in the labour camps.

Suddenly, the loud voice of the Moscow radio speaker Leviathan announced an important message. All conversations in the barrack quieted immediately, giving way to a complete silence. “Perhaps they’ll declare amnesty,” said someone in the back of the barrack. “You’ll kick it first,” someone else immediately replied. ... The lively discussion of the subject was interrupted again by Leviathan’s voice, who said: “Our Great Leader, Beloved Father, and Protector of the Soviet Nation, brilliant ‘*polkovodets*’ and military strategist, indefatigable champion of the rights of the working classes of the whole world, *skanchalsya segodnya*—died today. The

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<sup>27</sup> AW, AWI/916, Natalia Zarzycka, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Zek*—the camp jargon term for a prisoner.

government of the Soviet Union announces a week of national mourning, effective today.” ... As soon as the first shock had passed, someone shouted out loud: “The bandit’s kicked the bucket!” To which another added at once, “F\*\*\* him right!”<sup>29</sup>

Well, we rejoiced, of course, but the Russian wept, both men and women. ... The nachalstvo [camp management] was sad, too. And we rejoiced, rejoiced...<sup>30</sup>

Stalin’s death caused much joy among Poles. Of course, every prisoner silently hoped for changes. Ultimately, the tyrant responsible for so much injustice suffered by often innocent people was dead.<sup>31</sup>

The expected changes did not come, however. The power was seized by Lavrentiy Beria, who succeeded Stalin and launched a range of reforms, of the Gulag system as well. Although he declared an amnesty, it did not cover the political prisoners, only the criminal ones, who returned to the labour camps several weeks later anyway for having committed new offenses. Soon, the prisoners were surprised by more news, this time concerning the arrest of Beria, who for many years had been the head of the ministry responsible for the system of forced-labour camps. In this situation, the prisoners felt strong and determined enough to show to themselves and the authorities that they were ready to take their fate in their hands. In July 1953, riots erupted in the mines of Vorkuta, paralyzing the district for a dozen days or so.

It started in one of the largest mines—the “First Capital” mine. The Soviets said it was a strike, but it was rather an uprising, which later spread to other mines. People did not fight the NKVD guards, they simply did not go to work. I remember they even printed leaflets. In such conditions! They reached us too, in women’s camps. We worked at building houses in two 10-hour shifts, one shift by day, the other by night. There were people from various areas at the building site. Men left the leaflets in the tool shop. We were searched when we left the camp and returned to it, so the leaflets were carried in the shoes. We had two such leaflets—appeals written in Russian. They wrote that women should not, God forbid, follow their lead, that they should work.<sup>32</sup>

Women did not participate in the strikes, which can be inferred from the majority of the memoirs of women which touch upon this subject. Its omission in the accounts, sometimes many pages long, can be explained only

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<sup>29</sup> P. Świetlikowski, *Gulag Workuta. Raport Oficera Armii Krajowej* [Gulag Workuta: A Home Army officer’s report], Wrocławska Drukarnia Naukowa, Warszawa—Wrocław 1997, p. 195.

<sup>30</sup> *Stefania Szantyr Powolna*, authorised memoirs in the author’s own collection.

<sup>31</sup> AW, AWI/337, Wanda Kiałka, p. 27; AW, AWI/388, Wanda Kozłowska, p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> AW, AWI/338, Wanda Kozłowska, pp. 23-24.

by the fact that women's camps did not take part in the riots. Interestingly, many women did not write about the very strikes yet they mentioned events which took place after 1953 and were the result of the July uprising.

The strikes led to an extensive revision of sentences. Consequently, many women who were sentenced to 25 years of hard labour in 1945, had their time commuted to 10 years. The sentences were additionally reduced by several months for good behaviour. Obviously, soon after the strikes many things changed in the labour camps. Prisoners began to be paid low wages for their work. Both the bars in the barrack windows, and the numbers on prisoners' clothes had disappeared. What was of particular importance to most women prisoners, however, was the awareness that the end of their time was coming.<sup>33</sup>

The prisoners whose sentences were drawing to an end were transferred to camps known as "predshakhty." Obviously, they still had to go to work, but it was in these very camps that women prisoners could establish contacts with Poles from other camps, they were also allowed leaves of absence and could pass through the camp gates. These women who were released from the labour camps first were essentially left to themselves, since as soon as they passed the camp gates for the last time, the camp management was not concerned with them as prisoners any more. It should be added, that being released from the camp did not mean leaving Vorkuta and returning to the family, whether in Poland or in the USSR. Most of the now ex-prisoners were forbidden to leave the Vorkuta district. It was probably in part the consequence of their refusal to sign a Soviet identity card, for which the local MVD command made their return to the homeland difficult. This is why, immediately after they were released from the camp, the majority of women was forced to find a place to stay for as long as they waited for the permission to leave. Wanda Kozłowska recalls that it was quite difficult, since one usually did not have anything at all after leaving the camp. Also in this case, the bond between the Polish women and men and their solidarity proved to be very strong. All those who had been released earlier and had a lodging room and some free room there took under their roof those just released or tried to find them a place to live at large.<sup>34</sup>

Before the Polish people were given permissions to return to the country, they had to submit several documents to the local command to prove their citizenship, as well as receive an invitation to Poland from their families. All these formalities took extremely long. The whole waiting time, out of work,

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24–25; AW, AWI/916, Natalia Zarzycka, pp. 13-14.

<sup>34</sup> AW, AWI/337, Wanda Kiałka, pp. 30-31; AW, AWI/388, Wanda Kozłowska, p. 26; AW, AWI/848, Stefania Szantyr Powolna, pp. 30-32.

the Poles spent on social meetings. Name days, birthdays, and holidays were all perfect opportunities to be together and support one another. First loves were born. Natalia Zarzycka, who during her stay in the camp exchanged secret messages with Olek Zarzycki, married him in 1956. It was the first Polish wedding in Vorkuta, but not the last. The reception was a great event to all the Polish people living there. More than 70 guests arrived. In this moment, too, we may see how loyal and helpful to one another the Poles were.

We were preparing, for you could say it was quite a high-profile event. People from all camp took leaves of absence. All this company came to us. I remember, Lonek Kusoń, ... he was a provider in Vorkuta. He brought us a whole cask of herrings. We soaked these herrings, prepared them in many ways. I am not even talking about other victuals. There were seventy people or so, we had two rooms at our disposal. ... We could not afford to throw a great party or anything, so our friends, like that Lonek, for one thing, brought some products—some meat, or those herrings. Women processed it, made some pâtés, minces, God one knows what. Our acquaintances, they all gave something, not that every one of them brought something in their hands, simply those who could organised larger quantities of stuff. ... in any way, there was a lot of food, but the food was not as important as the desire to meet in such a large group. Why, there were delegations from almost all the camps.<sup>35</sup>

The wedding of Mr and Mrs Zarzycki was not the only one that took place in Vorkuta. In the memoirs, there are mentions of at least three other marriages to be found, between Polish women and their colleagues from the AK, whom they met in exile.

Of course, all these moments were very nice and pleasant, yet everybody was waiting for that one which would bring the permission to leave. In the situation where the women were waiting for the desired permission so long, sometimes the moment they received it was an utter surprise. Stefania Szantyr-Powolna found all her documents hanging on the handle of her room door, since she went out to a name-day party.<sup>36</sup> Wanda Kiałka set out for Poland short after the wedding of her friend Czesia.<sup>37</sup>

The years 1955–1956 are the period when the greatest number of Poles left Vorkuta. Some of them came back directly to Poland, while some stayed in the USSR.

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<sup>35</sup> AW, AWI/916, Natalia Zarzycka, pp. 15-16.

<sup>36</sup> AW, AWI/848, Stefania Szantyr Powolna, pp. 36-37.

<sup>37</sup> AW, WAI/337, Wanda Kiałka, p. 31.

The trip from Vorkuta certainly was different from the one they made several years earlier, to the camps. They knew their place of destination—the homeland, home town, home. In the face of such emotions, the reactions of women, who were moved that they were coming back to Poland so much that in the very first moment they were unable to utter a single word, are not surprising. After more than 10 years of life in “hell,” the women were going back home. By the end of World War II, most of them were still teenagers, or not much older; often they turned from girls into women in the forced-labour camp.

Those who returned to the country were not seen as victors by the society. They were not treated with respect or gratitude, either. Not unlike in the Soviet Union, the Polish law enforcement showed the former AK soldiers and prisoners superiority and mistrust. Many among them were fully rehabilitated only after 1989. The fact that the forced-labour camp prisoners became a point of interest as late as in the 1990s is of utmost importance to the form of many accounts available in the archives. Those who had the opportunity, and most of all courage and determination, had written their memories earlier. However, the memoirs published after 1989 are often significantly different from those deposited in the state archives. They are more voluminous, more detailed, and often contain the reflections of their authors.

### **Women-Soldiers of the Home Army in the Soviet Forced-Labour Camps of Vorkuta in 1944–1956**

*by Paulina Burkiciak*

#### *Abstract*

The mass arrests of members of the Home Army by NKWD began in 1944. The prisoners were subjected to brutal interrogation and then sentenced to death or time in Soviet labour camps. Many arrested women were treated by their oppressors just as brutally as men. One of the most important areas where Poles were sent were the camps near the town of Vorkuta. The chief occupation there was an extremely dangerous and hard work in the coal mines. In 1944–1956, women made up 11% of over 5,700 prisoners of Polish origin. Poles were sent to all the hard work, especially those assigned the “katorzhnik” category. Among the members of the Home Army, there developed a particular attachment, which involved mutual assistance and taking care of one another. After Stalin’s death, when riots erupted in Vorkuta, women did not participate but tried to support men nevertheless, since they knew that in this fight the future of all the prisoners was decided. In 1954 prisoners slowly

began to be released, yet even then most Poles could not leave Vorkuta. Among the released Poles in this period, there was much friendship and love, which often led to marriages. In the eyes of Polish prisoners, Polish women were remembered as “girls,” with all dignity, who had not been subjugated by the unfeeling system of the Gulag.

*Keywords:* Vorkuta, woman in the Home Army, Soviet forced-labour camps, Gulag camp.

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