

POLANDIAN

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REVIEWS, UNDERSTANDING
POLAND

The Ice Road is a remarkable book both because it tells a little-known but important story of human suffering and because it does so in a way that doesn't leave you wanting to slit your wrists. It is the autobiographical tale of 14-year-old Polish boy Stefan Waydenfeld and his family who were exiled to Siberia during World War II. The book traces their journey in the cattle wagons and goods trains of the Soviet Union from their home in Poland to a Stalinist labour camp in the frozen north and then on to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Persia.

The mass deportations of its citizens to remote and primitive corners of the Soviet Union during World War II is of monumental importance in the history of Poland. Between September 1939, when the Soviet Union invaded Poland in consort with Nazi Germany, and June 1941, when Hitler turned on Russia, the Soviet authorities forcibly exiled some 1.7 million people from the Polish territory under their control. They were sent to labour camps in the forests of northern Russia, to mines in Siberia and to arid regions of Soviet Asia. Precise figures will never be known, but it is estimated that about half of the deportees died from starvation, disease and the cold. Survivors and their descendants can still be found scattered across the fragmented Soviet empire today.

It sounds like a grim read, but it isn't—the main reason that it isn't being the fact that the author was a lively 14-year-old boy at the time of his deportation and, with the customary flexibility and innocence of youth, treated many of his experiences as grand adventures. The author himself explains this early in the narrative: “as is the privilege of youth, I lived my own life and only many years later, when I thought of our times in Siberia, did it strike me how ignorant I had been... of the sufferings of others and of the enormous difficulties of everyday life... I am almost ashamed to admit it, but at times I enjoyed my time in Siberia.”

The Waydenfelds were relatively lucky to find themselves assigned to an established logging encampment. A Russian inmate tells them: “You don't know how lucky you are. When we were brought here twelve years ago this was virgin forest. We cleared it, pulled the roots out with our bare hands and built Kvasha where nothing stood before. Not many lived to see it finished.” They were also lucky not to have been sent to the Siberian mines with their horrendous mortality rates. It's clear from Stefan's narrative that they didn't always have enough to eat, but nobody starves. Working conditions were harsh, especially in the minus-40-degree winter, but we don't hear of anybody dying. It isn't clear if this lack of tragedy is a result of the author's confessed youthful solipsism or a realistic picture of one particularly fortunate fragment of the gulag.

There were certainly Boy's Own adventures. Stefan recalls the thrill of bareback riding through the forests singing Russian songs and galloping from awakened bears, being sent alone into the wild to mark timber for the cutting crews, and an escape by raft that sounds too fantastical to be true. The raft episode marks a startling twist in the tale, and in history. Shortly after the Nazi invasion of Russia, Stalin released all deported Polish citizens and gave them a free pass to wherever in the Soviet Union they wanted to go—at least those that hadn't already been shot in the back of the head or frozen to death. It was the kind of whimsical and hypocritical act of which only true dictators are capable, but it probably saved the Waydenfelds lives. A similar whimsy prompts them to name Astrakhan, a city thousands of kilometres away on the Caspian Sea, as their destination of choice.

This decision, about a third of the way into the book, is the start of a journey far more extraordinary than the one that took the family from Otwock to Siberia. It reads like an escape fantasy inspired by snow-crazed starvation, but it's true and it was the experience of hundreds of thousands of Poles in 1941 and 1942. Stefan and his mother and father travel across the insane and panicked breadth of wartime Russia in cattle wagons, on luxury river cruisers, in buses and on foot. They live in unlikely sounding far flung cities like Chimkent and Yangi-Yul, glimpse the blue towers of Samarkand across the steppe, and bribe their way into and out of luxury and danger with alarming regularity. It's an illuminating picture of a state in utter chaos where a few 10 rouble notes mean the difference between lice-ridden death and sleeping on feathers.

All along the way the Waydenfelds meet Poles like themselves making for rumoured Polish Army staging areas, many in rags, a few in luxury and all wondering what has happened to the officers—most of whom are in mass graves just outside Katyn. The book closes in a British refugee camp in the Iranian port of Pahlevi. Through epilogues and annexes we learn that Stefan later joined the Second Polish Corp and fought his way along the length of Italy. After the war, he married a Polish girl he met in Yangi-Yu, became a doctor and settled in London's Kentish Town.

The Ice Road is not a sophisticated read, but it is a story you've never heard and would barely believe if history wasn't there to tell you it was true. The book is published by [Aquila Polonica](#)—a publisher with the unlikely but laudable goal of telling "the greatest story never told... Poland in World War II" Read it, you won't regret it.

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