

THE EXPERIENCE OF CZECH CITIZENS PRISONED IN THE SOVIET FORCED LABOR CAMPS

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More than one year we are trying to record memories of the last living Czech citizens who were prisoned between 40's and 60's in the Soviet forced labor camps. Experience of gulag victims was deliberately concealed in post-war communist Czechoslovakia. Some articles, mostly in daily newspaper or TV-reports about some individual destinies appeared after the fall of communist regime, but until recently this theme had not been systematically examined. Unfortunately, only individuals are living today. Despite this fact, memories of last living witnesses are very valuable, especially when the archival research of this theme in the Russian archives is not for many reasons very simple.

Czechoslovak citizens were among thousands of Europeans who went through the Soviet labor camps. They were exposed to almost all kinds of persecution in the Soviet union that were used by security, judicial and extrajudicial apparatus, be it executions based on decisions of „special councils“, imprisonment and deportations to gulags, forced migrations, all kinds of displacement and expatriation.

We can divide the Czechoslovak experience with the Gulags into three main periods. The first period took place during the Red Terror in USSR at the end of the 30s. The wave of repressions against all possible elements of the population also impacted on several thousands of the Czechs living in USSR. A few hundred of these – former legionnaires, captives in The World War I, emigrants to USSR before 1939 including members of economic and political immigration, members of Czech minorities both in the USSR territory and territories acquired by the Soviet Union during World War II in the Polish Volyn, Halicz and Romanian Bessarabia became victims of persecution in the Soviet camps.

The second period began with the outbreak of WWII in 1939, after which a new wave of emigration to the USSR started. Among refugees from territories occupied by Germany or Hungary there were many Czechoslovak citizens – mostly Czech, Rusyns or Jews. Many of them were captured upon crossing the border, condemned for espionage or illegal border crossing and cast into the forced labor camps for years. Another persecuted group were the Czechoslovak Jews from the first European Jewish transport to Nisko on the San, Czechoslovak legion soldiers and victims of the so-called Katyn crime who were Czechs by origin.

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The third period came after the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army in 1945. In addition to the war prisoners with Czech nationality or Czechoslovak citizenship, who were fighting in enemy armies, hundreds of innocent people were also abducted by the Soviet Counterintelligence from the Czechoslovak territory to USSR at the end of or after the war.

We have recorded interviews with 30 witnesses until today. Most of the interviews were recorded on the territory of the Czech Republic, few of them with pre-war Czechoslovak citizens living abroad in foreign countries. Among project's respondents there are different groups of witnesses who became prisoners of the Soviet regime from different reasons and a nature of their persecution is different too.

The majority of the witnesses are Rusyns by origin. Their destinies are very similar. They were born in Carpathian Ruthenia, the easternmost part of pre-war Czechoslovakia. Most of them were teenagers when Carpathian Ruthenia was annexed by Hungary (after agreement with Nazi Germany) in March 1939. Immediately after annexation they were forced to undergo Levente pre-military training. To avoid the service in the Hungarian army, they decided to flee – like many of their peers – to the Soviet Union. At that time, thousands of mostly youngsters were running out from Carpathian Ruthenia across the boarder to the Soviet Union, lured by the propaganda of a classless society and freedom of political and religious persuasion. They also believed that they could join the anti-fascist resistance.

But the reality was different. Soon after crossing the boarder they were caught by a Soviet patrol and imprisoned. Subsequently they were passing through various NKVD prisons, where they were jailed with another refugees in overcrowded cells and were shortly interrogated. They were accused to be spies because they crossed the illegal boarders. After several months, a trial in the prisons without counsel followed. Most of them were sentenced to three years in forced labor camps. In fact, they could be lucky, because the trial took their age into consideration. Members of the communist party were condemned up to eight years of punishment.

After a verdict they were loaded to the overcrowded cattle wagon and sent into labor camps in the most remote corners of USSR. To the areas, where the railway wasn't built yet, they were transported on boats or they had to go by walk. For most of them the final stations were labor camps in the Russian North – Archangelsk, Vorkuta, Pechora or Kotlas territory, less of them were deported into camps in Norilsk territory or in north-east of Siberia – Kolyma territory. Subsequently, they were exploited together with their fellow prisoners of other nationalities or

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Soviet political prisoners and criminals for a slave labor. They had to work in inhuman conditions in the quarries, mines, on railway constructions, navigation canals, felling timber and so on. Sometimes they had to build a camp with their bare hands. Nevertheless they got minimum portions of food. After several months number of them were considered to be „Dochodyaga“ – term for broken, wasted prisoner, who already had more or less resigned themselves to death. But a forming of the Czechoslovak army in USSR saved them. The nascent Czechoslovak unit was looking for soldiers, thus was given amnesty for Czechoslovak citizens by the Soviet government. During 1942 and 1943 they were coming to Buzuluk, where the Czechoslovak army was formed. After a basic military training they were assigned to the unit of troops of the Czechoslovak army. They took a part in the final military operations of Svoboda's army and were fighting in many important battles on the Eastern Front. After the end of WWII they moved to Czechoslovakia shortly before Carpathian Ruthenia was annexed by the Soviet Union. Most of them decided to stay in the army or to serve in police squads. However, most of them were persecuted by the communist regime during the next years. They were released from the army and worked in normal professions.

Another numerous and still living group of witnesses are war captives who became soldiers of enemy armies. During the war thousands of soldiers with Czechoslovak citizenship were serving in enemy armies – especially in the Wehrmacht. When thinking about territory of contemporary Czech Republic, we are talking especially about people from the boarder regions – national mixed Hlučín and Těšín regions, which were occupied by Germany after Munich agreement in October 1938. From historical reasons Germans considered Hlučín region a German territory and in Těšín region Nazis established a specific national policy. During occupation, most of the local Czech inhabitants became voluntarily or under pressure citizens of the German empire and therefore they were forced to serve in Wehrmacht. During the war some of them were taken to captivity or deserted and entered the Czechoslovak military forces. However, many of conscript young men were killed or ended in Soviet captivity for many years. They were deported to the captive or to the labor camps in the whole Soviet Union (most often in surroundings of large cities – Moscow, Leningrad). The length of their captivity was different - most of them spent from 1 till 5 years, but some of them could return home after 10 or more years. It depended on the living conditions in camps too but, in fact, in all camps the regime was tough, a labor was excessive, there was a lack of food – all these facts resulted in relatively high mortality. Despite

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this, conditions for survival were mostly better than in labor camps. After this, the men, who came back to Czechoslovakia, weren't marked as traitors or collaborators, and they got the Czechoslovak citizenship back again. Nevertheless most of them were forced to do a hard manual work - mostly in mines in Ostrava region.

Hundreds of innocent people were also dragged off by the Soviet counterintelligence from the Czechoslovakia territory to USSR at the end of or after the war. Most of them were members of so-called White emigration (mostly Russian and Ukrainian immigrants), a less Czech Germans or people uncomfortable for the Soviet regime. Members of the Soviet counterintelligence were arresting them throughout the territory of Czechoslovakia without any approval of the Czechoslovak government. After that, the arrested were transported to Soviet camps, where about one third of them died. The rest of them were allowed to return to Czechoslovakia after several years, largely during the mid 50's.

Because most of the abducted were old or middle age people, of course, they are already dead today. That's why we could record interviews only with the youngest. Among them are soldiers of the Red army who stayed in Czechoslovakia after the war or people who came from national-mixed families (mostly Czech-german families) and therefore were considered Germans. Their origin caught them up even after several years. For example, one of the recorded witnesses was abducted to USSR in 1950, when he tried to visit his relatives in SRN. He could return to Czechoslovakia after three years. All of them were consistent with the fact, that their return to Czechoslovakia was perhaps the most problematic and difficult part of their imprisonment in USSR. Soviet authorities didn't take their Czech nationality or Czechoslovak citizenship to account for a long time. Our witnesses belong to happier ones, who managed to return home.