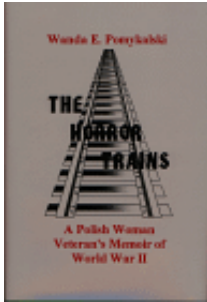


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**The Horror Trains: A Polish Woman Veteran's Memoir of World War II by Wanda E. Pomykalski (1999), 362 pages.**



This is a book worth your time if you want to learn about the trials and tribulations of a young Polish girl, who was captured by Soviet security men while trying to escape from Poland to neutral Hungary in December 1939. The reader may want to know that the story has a happy ending. Wanda Pomykalski escaped from her horror trains just in time because of good luck and, no doubt, because she was young, healthy, and determined. She has lived in California with her family for many years but only now got around to compiling her notes and, at the urging of her friends, was able to present her riveting story in English.

This memoir reads like a novel as its 32 short chapters cover many extraordinary events; as one phase ends, a new one begins. It starts with Wanda spending her happy summer months of 1939 in Warsaw, waiting to begin her medical studies. Charming young men are squiring her in romantic cafes and sentimental music fills the air.

Like a bombshell this idyll ends abruptly on September 1. With her parents away in western Poland, Wanda follows the familiar evacuation of Polish troops heading east while the German bombers strike from the air. Then Soviet troops attack from the east. She is caught at the border; she describes her tribulations covering the period, which ends in August 1941. Most of them are endless travels by the "horror trains" as a Soviet prisoner. She is accused of spying ("anyone leaving our country is automatically considered a spy") and is informed that after 5-10 years in prison she will be "allowed" to work in a Soviet labor camp. She boards her first cattle train in southern Poland (which was declared a part of the Soviet Union) and is transported to Kiev and Odessa with many of her woman companions. The horrible winter of 1940 is a nightmare for the prisoners. The guards are often sadists and sanitary conditions appalling. The people are constantly crying for water, bread, and spoons of abominable soup, their nourishment. The bitter cold kills many. The most terrible aspect of this ordeal is the contempt and hostility of the guards or interrogators towards terrorized women who are being carried away to awful destinations. After Odessa, the trains travel for weeks to Ufa, Omsk, and Tomsk, way past the Ural mountains, towards the town of Tayga. This Godforsaken place is 2,000 miles from Warsaw, the same as the distance between Washington, D.C. and California.

It is almost as if God rescues these people. Our writer learns the news of the German invasion of Russia while reading a discarded newspaper in the latrine! It also contains information that Stalin agreed to free imprisoned Poles and allowed the formation of a Polish Army. Suddenly there is some hope and travel is permitted to Samara (Kuybyshev), where Gen. Anders is assembling his prospective troops, along with the liberated civilians, some of whom can barely walk. Many of them lack shoes and cover their feet with bits of discarded automobile tires. The arrival in Italy brings an uplifting ending to Wanda's tortuous saga.

In closing it is well to recall that similar tales were never recorded by thousands who did not survive. They were shipped in hundreds of horror trains to Siberia and the Arctic regions not only from Poland but also from the Baltic countries during World War II. Others met the same fate even after the 1944 at the hands the NKVD. For these multitudes there was no happy outcome.

***George Suboczewski***