

Józefa's Letters – Extraction From Oblivion

INTRODUCTION

Józefa Julianova Bujdo (nee. Bohdanowicz) was born 13th March 1864 in the small hamlet of *Wolczki*, near the village of *Orla*, close the town of *Lida*. Józefa was raised within a gentrified catholic family of lawyers and in 1892, she would marry a local Belarusian forester, Konstantin Bujdo.

Konstantin and Józefa were employed to manage the grounds for a local noble family; The Stravinski's¹ whose estate was in the small village of *Nakryszki*² In return they were allowed to live on the estate, going on to raise a family of six children – two sons and four daughters. During the period 1925- 1935, the growing family were engaged in various small enterprises that included running a family shop selling grocery & household products that was based in *Dziatlava*³ to operating a small ferry service transporting people and livestock across the river Neman, a main arterial river of this region.

As Józefa's own children would start their respective families, the male line of sons adopted working roles commensurate with the protection of the recently formed *Rzeczpospolita Polska*, the Second Polish Republic. Józefa's youngest son, Piotrek, enlisted into the 27th Uhlan regiment but shortly contracted tuberculosis from which he would not survive. In 1929, the eldest son, Alojzy, would enter service with the regional police. Konstantin, who was considerably older than Józefa by some 18 years, would pass away from natural causes in 1938.

WHY WAS JÓZEFA DEPORTED?

On September 17th 1939, as defined and in accordance with the secret protocols of the Molotov Ribbentrop pact, Soviet troops invaded and occupied the macro borderland region of Eastern Poland leading to the commencement of premeditated violent repressive actions within this region and against all inhabitants deemed hostile to Soviet occupation.

At this point, a snapshot of Józefa's family would show the following composition with approximate ages in parentheses; Józefa (75) one son, Alojzy (40) & four daughters; Helena (35), Maria (30), Janina (28) & Wanda (21). All Józefa's children were married and started families of their own. Józefa's daughter Maria married Francizek Kliś who, along with son Alojzy, would both become senior officers in the Polish Police operating within the Nowogródek region. The profession of 'Policeman' as an authoritarian service purposed, in this case, to uphold principles of Polish law would automatically & immediately be categorized as hostile to the Soviet invasion which was intent on usurping and destroying the Polish power base.

Contact was made in April 2017, to 'Memorial' 4 to request what information could be located to attribute the reason why Józefa was deported alone to Aktyubinsk 5. In May 2017, Memorial, with the help of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) was able to locate the NKVD list from the SBU archive in Kyiv that confirmed the name of Józefa's son, Alojzy Bujdo, was present on the list. The official response from Memorial was accompanied with photographs of the original archive document that reads the following:

"355. Bujdo Alojzy, son of Konstantin and Józefa, date of birth 27.11.1905, male, the village Nakrasyki, Novogrudski region. Education: 3 years of grammar school. Recruited by the police on 16.05.1929. Senior officer of the Novogrudski voivodeship." 6

The presence of Alojzy's name on the list confirmed that his profession (Polish Police Officer) would have been deemed 'hostile' to Soviet intentions in 1940 and in this way, his targeting remained a continuation of 'The Polish Operation of the NKVD' 7; actions that were rationalized as removal of 'social enemies', or 'enemies of the people'. Although Alojzy was arrested, and would later escape and survive, it would be Józefa – his mother – that would not escape arrest. From the location of Baranovichy on April 13th, 1940, Józefa Bujdo would be repressed under NKVD's 'parents of traitors' order - the Soviet Unions' extrajudicial process of deciding the fates of the inhabitants of this region solely by administrative mean. This action that would become a part of wider and sustained effort to ethnically cleanse Poles from this region by arresting holders of 'hostile' professions and deeming their families as 'anti-communist elements' – a crime which that was also punishable.

At age 76, Józefa would be separated from her children, forced onto to a packed 'converted' cattle train and exiled as the only member of her family to Aktyubinsk, Kazakhstan (KSSR). Józefa's transit was part of a forced population transfer of 1.2 million of Poles living in the borderlands that were carried out in four waves of mass deportations during the Soviet occupation period of 1939-1941. Józefa would spend around three weeks aboard a cramped train where poor living conditions, rationed food & water, restrictions to fresh air & natural light and non-existent provisions for clean sanitation – conditions that claimed the lives of many weaker members of the young, elderly and infirm during the two thousand five hundred kilometer journey eastwards.

Given her age and physical condition, Józefa would become part of an *exile settlement* or "supervised residence". Compared to the Gulag labour camps, these involuntary settlements had the appearance of "normal" settlements: people lived in families, and there was more freedom of movement; however, it remained under direct monitoring of the NKVD. Józefa's 'conviction and sentencing' was consistent with the forced resettling of entire categories of the Polish and other borderlands minorities to remote and sparsely populated areas of the Soviet Union.

JÓZEFA'S LETTERS

Within a short period following arrival to the settlement in Aktyubinsk, Józefa would commence corresponding and exchanging letters with her daughters that were now living in the recently formed BSSR. Between April 1940 and June 1941, Józefa sent twenty-one letters to her daughters where almost every letter was just a single piece of paper with the text written on both sides. Sometimes the letter was folded such that it could be used as an envelope. From the collection of letters, one such envelope displayed the name of the addressee and address (e.g. Józefa's daughter Maria)* and the addresser (Józefa) ** in Russian. However, the main content of this letter was written in Józefa's own language – a borderlands dialect of Polish.

Józefa wrote in a regional borderlands dialect that reflected the linguistic and temporal influences of her geographical area that blended old Polish (Staropolski) mixed with Russian words. e.g. *"dziecko do iasli⁹ mogo oddac i razem pracowac"* *"omanacka ty moia! to słowa dlamnie mucitelny¹⁰ bul serca"* Whilst the dialect resembles the grammatical structure of Polish, it was noticeable from the orthography of its written form that many diacritical marks were absent that would have been consistent with the formal Polish language of that time i.e. the acute accent (ć, ń, ó, ś, ź); the tail (ą, ę) were not used. More often the stroke (ł) and overdot (ż) were marked with the overdot also used above the letter (y).

The process of decoding the dialect¹¹ used by Józefa resulted in a literal transcription of every word Józefa wrote down – a process which included the words she repeated and misspelt (and in some cases she would also strikethrough and rewrite with the correct spelling). Not all Józefa's pen strokes could be decoded due to the physical deterioration of the paper and aberrations resulting from watermarks, smudging and paper folds. Space restrictions and limited supply of paper meant Józefa used every available square centimeter to communicate. Many words were 'squeezed' into the margins or by changing the direction of the text, writing up the page to fill whatever space remained. It can be seen also that Józefa reduces the size of the text when remaining writing space is running out.

In some cases, Józefa herself omitted syntax (either through duress of her conditions or rushing) resulting in some sentences losing precise meaning. During the philological transcription, missing syntax or incorrect spelling logically deduced from the context was added to facilitate a smoother reading process and translation. In the extract from Letter 12 below, the missing syntax and spelling corrections are denoted by square brackets []

*"[ie]zeli wtakim nescenscu, iak ia jestem, ~~oddalona~~ oddalona odswoich dzieatek iswoiei aicyzny, swego piotracka iswego menża, aaica waszego. zeby piotreczek mui zył ipapocko, cyby ia to ~~cierpaleby~~ cerpalemby? nigdy by tego ~~neceralaby~~ necerpalemby, takiei nendzy, takiego głodu. ateres ~~seły~~ schaty kazo wyberac, bonemam cem płacic. idze zima, amoie curki animysło, że to syberia istrasne mrozy, amatka ibe[s]chalupy ib[e]sopału."*¹²

Józefa did not date any letters. Only two letters display dates; Letter 15 displays the date 20.XII.1940 and the postal marks from an envelope (Letter 16) confirms the dates 21.02.41 & 04.03.41. Without calendar dates to determine the temporal order, analysis of the content was used to create a timeline. From this analysis, three themes can be seen to emerge that reflect Józefa's' changing emotional states, which can be broadly defined as: i.) A matriarchal mother intent on surviving, maintaining family order and hopeful that she will return to her family ii.) A philosophical and reflective response to a situation that is in limbo iii.) Increasing claims of ill health that abandons all hope of return.

WHAT HAPPENED TO JÓZEFA?

The last archive documents concerning Józefa were retrieved from a file dated 1943 and was written in Russian. The Aktyubinsk state archivist confirmed the document as the official entry following Józefa's death, which most likely occurred from the combined effects of her age (79), over work and nutritional deprivation.¹⁴ The site of the former Kolkhoz that Józefa and other exiles were relocated, is now the Kazakh village of Nurbulak (previously Shibaevka) and this location was visited by the author in early 2018.

JÓZEFA'S LEGACY

The letters of Józefa Bujdo are one of the largest collections of writings by a Polish exile to emerge from the KSSR during 1940-1941. As historical artefacts, the letters provide a date stamped record of the time it took for post to travel during the war from within the USSR, the extent to which official censorship was applied to letter writing

and what exiles felt they could risk writing. As handwritten letters, they present the ethnographic influences of the borderland region that was reflected in the physical written language. As personal exchanges between separated family members, we can see how emotions, especially the trauma created by the conditions of exile, were manipulated, transmitted and used by exiles as survival mechanisms.

The children of Józefa who were not deported received the good fortune to survive. After the war, daughters Helena, Janina, Maria (who saved her mothers' letters) and son Alex, could not agree to become Soviet citizens that would enable them to return to their borderlands home. They accepted repatriation and were resettled in the newly formed areas of West Poland in present day Gorzów Wielkopolskie. Józefa's youngest daughter, Wanda, became a refugee who would lead her family through post war Europe in an extended journey over land and sea to the United Kingdom where she and her family would be settled into a 'displaced persons' camp. It would become crucial to this recovery project that both Józefa's daughters and letters survived the war as both preserved the poignant memories of Józefa which, after decades of hibernation, would eventually be discovered by subsequent generations.

The discovery of *Józefa's Letters* and subsequent historical research has allowed for the recreation of her identity through which Józefa has been reunited with her family – the fulfillment of her dying wish. By sharing the evidence of Józefa's suffering, her descendants have now been able to respectfully acknowledge the period of trauma from which their gift of life was effectively created from. For the many millions whose ancestors were also brutally repressed but no such collection of letters exist, this project of *Józefa's Letters* adds to the growing collections of trauma literature from this period that can help to describe those fates that would have similarly perished under totalitarian ideology.

1 Further information on the magnate Jan Stravinski and this family can be found in: History of residences in the former borderlands of the Republic, ed. second reviewed and supplemented, vol. 2: Brest-Lithuanian provinces, Nowogrodzkie, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1993, p. 272, ISBN 83-04-03784-X, ISBN 83-04-03701-7 (all)

2 A village located in Belarus about 13 km west of Dziatlava. Nakryszki, between World War I and World War II, was in the Eastern part of the Second Polish Republic.

3 A town now located in West Belarus. Between World War I and World War II, Zdzieciół (now Dziatlava) was in the Eastern part of the Second Polish Republic. It was the seat of Gmina Zdzieciół in the Nowogródek Voivodeship.

4 A Moscow based independently run institute that commemorates and documents the details of victims resulting from Soviet mass terror.

5 Questions as to why only Józefa was deported is discussed further in an extended article.

6 355. БУЙДО Алоиз, сын Константина и Юзефы, дата рождения 27.11.1905, мужской пол, имение Накрышки, уезд Новогрудки. Образование: 3 класса гимназии. Принят в полицию 16.05.1929. Старший постерунковый Новогрудского воеводства.

7 This view was given during interview with historian Nikita Petrov of Memorial Moscow

9 iasli (dialect) jasli (RU) żłobek (PL) nursery (EN)

"They can give the child to the nursery and work together." (Letter 1) 10
mucitelny (RU) rozdzierający (PL) excruciating (EN)

"Maria, my darling, those words cause an excruciating pain in my heart. (Letter 14)

11 The letters were initially decoded and translated by Dagmara Zimnoch, Marek Kazmierski & Blanka Konopka. The full literal transcription of Józefa's dialect, translation into modern Polish and English was made by doctoral researcher Aleksandra Imińska Duma

12 "If in such a misery as I am, far away from my children and my motherland, from my beloved Peter, from my husband, and your father. If my Peter and Daddy had lived, would I have suffered? I would never have suffered such poverty and such hunger. And now they order me to get out from the apartment, as I have no means to pay. Winter is coming, but my daughters do not care that this is Siberia and it is terribly cold here and mother has no shelter and no heating." (Letter 12)

13 This is the view of Aktyubinsk historian and archive researcher Dr. Nadezhda Stepanenko, director of the Polish Cultural Centre "Światło"