

# FROM THE DIARY OF THE SCHOOL'S "SENIOR"

26 February 1942

"Kainda!"<sup>1</sup>... A Russian station in the middle of nowhere. Silent and empty. We're getting off... Is this it?.. Together with four other comrades in arms, the first candidates for officer cadet training, I sit with our clobber awaiting the return of Captain Ż., who has gone to find out where our accommodation is. At last we hear the echo of approaching footsteps. "OK, let's go, I've found Lieutenant B.; there's room in some kind of "club". They're waiting for us." Encumbered like beasts of burden, carrying our own suitcases and suitcases not our own, we set off... The club's empty: only rows of bunk beds hint that someone is meant to live there...

5 March

Yesterday we were joined by the final group which is due to participate in the School. We all look so funny with our shaved "pates". Because I have the pepper and salt tint of an "older gentleman", my blue-grey head shines like a beacon. Jurek P. almost burst into tears when they cut off his beautiful "locks". He, such a fine *arbiter elegantiarum*<sup>2</sup>.

...Today, they read out to us the order initiating the opening of the basic course at the Officer Cadet School of Armoured Warfare. "They've pulled a fast one on us," say those who came to us from the battalions, "We were already serving at the front in 1939, and we've also been through similar courses in Totskoye and Tatishchev<sup>3</sup>." To be honest, I was really glad to be able to undertake basic recruit training, as I actually don't know what a soldier's duties on active service are; there were no professorships in the subject at the university in Lwów, and – despite my heartfelt support of them – I had no direct contact in Poland with members of the armed forces.

10 March

...Judgement day for the School. Because the company couldn't march in step, we were bombarded with shouts of "flying boys" from all quarters. And so we arrived at the drill square. We were split into squads... Small arms training. I was so angry with being called "flying boy" and "cavalry boy" that I forgot which squad I'd been assigned to. And so I start running from one to the other... No, not that one... And the Commandant just stands there and watches. "Soldier, don't you know where your squad is?"... I say nothing; what am I meant to say, after all? Should I tell him that I'm beside myself with rage, angry because I'm going to have to clean my uniform, once again "iron" the creases in my trousers under the blanket, that my blood is almost boiling over?... "What's your name?" – "Łukasiewicz" – "General, or what, for God's sake?!" – "Rifleman, Sir!" – "Make sure, Łukasik, this never happens again. Dismissed!" ... And off I went... From that time on, the Commandant never called me by my real name, but would always mangle it one way or the other: Łukasik... Łukaszewicz... Łukaszewski... Łukasiński... It drives me up the wall, but what can I do? Łukasik it must be.

23 March

Hooray! We're leaving! Last night we got the news that we are to leave Soviet territory. Apparently we are going to Persia where we are to be trained and receive equipment. At last!.. We completed basic training not so long ago – now the real School will start. Actually we've already been through a pretty gruelling "school"; the day before yesterday we were ordered to erect tents for the conversion course. We had to dig deep into the ground and pull Soviet tents over ourselves. But, our departure has put an end to all this...

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<sup>1</sup> In Kyrgyzstan. The location of the Training Centre for Armoured Warfare.

<sup>2</sup> "judge of artistic taste and etiquette" – epithet used by Tacitus, Plutarch and Pliny the Elder to describe Petronius, possibly applied with a liberal dash of sarcasm.

<sup>3</sup> Near the Russian/Kazakh border – formation centres for the Polish army.

## *26 March*

Sleet. The company is drawn up standing up to its ankles in muddy clay. Each of us loads onto our backs the supplies issued us, blankets, a steel helmet; some, like me, who have more "togs", have both hands full, holding suitcases, bags and bundles. We find out that we have to walk 12–16 kilometres to the station of Kara-Balty where a train is standing ready for us. The boss holds a short speech... "Right turn! Forward, march!" ... We walk on... Young Russian girls cannot hold their tears back, saying a fond farewell to some of our comrades in arms who were "lucky" enough to eat at a good table.

...I buckle under the weight of the heavy rucksack loaded to the brim. Around my neck, attached to a belt from my trousers, "dangles" a suitcase containing wild tobacco and sugar which I bought with my last 80 Roubles to keep myself stocked up. After all, the road ahead is a long one – and where we are going, it's anybody's guess... Every 20 or 30 metres I swing the "pendant suitcase" off my chest onto my back and move forward... I'm out of breath... it's hard going... I'm dripping with sweat... under my feet I feel the squelch of the clayey "soup". – But I don't stop, because I'm ashamed of what my colleagues would say. With his customary spirit of comradeship, Jurek M. – whose rucksack was empty because he did not get all his supplies – took my "officer cadet's medal", as he called it, and so we took it in turns to carry it... Finally we glimpse the buildings of Kara-Balty. We're on the train...

## *En route*

... Tashkent... Samarkand...<sup>4</sup> Ashkhabad...<sup>5</sup> unfold before our eyes as if in a kaleidoscope...

## *1 April*

Krasnovodsk... Tied up at the quay is the Soviet M/S Profintern. After a long time spent sitting on our rucksacks and bags, we are gradually allowed onboard one-by-one. After several hours, there was literally not a square metre of space left free... Evening... Everyone had to kip down where they stood. In actual fact, we slept in a squatting down position, as there was absolutely no way we could extend our legs. Those who happened to be positioned in the way of the toilets would be periodically startled from their slumbers, waking their neighbours with their oaths and curses. Dreadful!! A lack of water, the cold biting wind and hunger wore us out completely...

## *3 April*

At last a free country! I find out that we're entering the port of Pehlevi on the Caspian Sea. How will they receive us? Better than so far; there's no doubt about that! On the quayside, we meet our first Englishman and Indians. As we make our way, our eyes open wide with amazement... Shops! Shops that are open – full of goods, treats and goodies – and no queues! Shop owners and traders beckon to us... and next to us Persian boys mill around with cakes, cigarettes and "hurma harosha"...<sup>6</sup> Men break rank, here and there they run out and soon are back with fistfuls of sweets and everything the heart could desire... We're marching to our transit camp...

## *5 April*

...Ten or so rucksacks covered in blankets, eggs, "hurma", dates, raisins, some sandwiches from the "provisions" issued to us on white (!!!) bread – an Easter table.

It was a beautiful sight. Nearby we hear the crash of the sea. Above us, a cloudless sky... Wishes... But our hearts are unsettled, as our thoughts are with those who remained "there"... What will happen to them? Will they join us soon?

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<sup>4</sup> Both in Uzbekistan.

<sup>5</sup> In Turkmenistan.

<sup>6</sup> Have unsuccessfully tried to find out what this may be...

*12 April*

Our third disinfection in a row... My God!... But it's behind us now...

*17 April*

This morning we left by bus for Teheran. I am enthralled and bedazzled. A magnificent mountain road above precipices... It defies description. Qazvin... We stay overnight in a beautiful villa...

*18 April*

Teheran... City of glamour and misery... Culture, beauty, luxury... Our heads are buzzing and we simply can't believe our eyes. So this is the godforsaken East? This is where culture was?

*20 April*

We didn't spend long in the Shah's capital. After disinfection (presumably the last!), thanks to the good services of the "youngest" tankman, Captain of Horse<sup>7</sup> T., beautifully decorated cars convey us to the railway station. Proper passenger coaches... and we're on our way again...

*25 April*

Ahvaz... Oh, I really thought I was going to pass out. Unbearable heat. Sweat is running from every pore in my skin. But we can't waste time – we have lectures and classes. We even can't escape the square-bashing! Too bad... We're at School. There are no passes out, but even so quite a few of us take "Polish" leave.

Today someone put about the rumour that we are to leave for England where we will be given more training. We'll see...

*27 April*

The shores of Persia blur into the distance. This hospitable country has made such an impression on us; the place where we saw what real life looks like. The Dutch ship we are on is making southwards. The Dutch crew, so very polite and well-intentioned, do what they can to make us comfortable. They even wanted to give us, students of the School, cabins, but our commanding officer said that we do not as yet have the rights of officer cadets and... that's why we're suffocating below deck... But the day will come when they'll respect us too.

*3 May*

We gaze proudly at the mast, which flies the Polish flag... I've been promoted to "senior rifleman"<sup>8</sup>, I don't really know why, but I'm pleased because I'll be getting a few extra pennies... And on the ship, you need a lot of dough... the reasons are obvious: lemonade, cigarettes...

*12 May*

Suez... Trucks are already waiting for us. But I was wrong – the trucks will carry our luggage and we – as usual – will be on foot...

Tents, bathrooms, excellent food... A rest and relaxation... We're due to leave tomorrow...

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<sup>7</sup> *Rotmistrz in Polish.*

<sup>8</sup> *Starszy strzelec in Polish; corporal or lance corporal would be the British Army equivalent.*

*14 May*

Yesterday we crossed the border – we're travelling through Palestine. The verdure of the palm trees, huge cacti, arable fields, beautiful orchards and at every stop – the cry goes up: ..."Baksheesh!"

What beautiful eyes the little Arab children have (I like the women too); with what grace the Arab women move, carrying on their heads large water holders made of clay... We pass through towns large and small, and now we are at the end of our journey. We're getting off. They word is that we will be staying here...

*16 May*

...Hill...<sup>9</sup> We've set up home for good now...

*15 July*

We're preparing to march out. We're moving to Egypt, where we are to receive tanks and continue training. I've really come up trumps with this officer cadet thing, as at least I'm getting to see a bit of the world. We're sitting in tents, on our luggage, waiting for the trucks. We're wondering what it will be like this time.

*21 July*

Cairo, the Pyramids, the Nile and... a little, black scarab beetle...

*5 August*

And Hill again! So much was said about this on the way. We've returned to our old place, almost to the same district.

Lectures... exercises... guard duties ... driving tanks and other vehicles... I don't even have time to jot down a couple of sentences in my diary.

*28 August*

I have to resit a test in metals technology. It's a difficult subject for me, because at grammar school I wasn't that interested in chemistry and metals. Ha, now you must suffer, philosopher! My God, what's the damn difference between steel and cast steel, iron and cast iron – I don't think I'll ever learn! Staszek S. helps me as much as he can...

Well! All my "parroting" paid off somehow... It was hard, but it worked. Thank God!

*7 September*

I've not put pen to paper, because I'm at sixes and sevens with our impending departure. The day before yesterday, after I got back from Jerusalem, I learnt that we are leaving. Again? I mean, come off it, the course had just started up nicely! The word on the grapevine is that we're going to Iraq to join the rest of the Army, and there it's just hot, sandy desert. Dreadful!

*12 September*

Suez... S/S Kościuszko...

*24 September*

... a port on the Tigris...

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<sup>9</sup> Gadera-Hill, now in Israel.

22 February 1943

I only just got through my resits. And I've been so behind... But I got through somehow... I know that my pay won't be "great" – but do you fight at the front with "pay"?... It has been decreed (or rather the School Commandant gave the order) that a "Special Magazine Issue" be published... Everyone must write, whether they have talent or not, otherwise they will be put on report. You can choose any topic, but it must be based on your recollections and experience of the School. And this is where talent is suddenly revealed. Surprise, surprise! The person who you thought incapable of putting two sentences together writes like a member of the professional literati. An Editorial Committee has been established and has started work. At night (because there are also other additional classes), next to a lamp in the tent or in the lecture hall, you can see bent-over figures, writing... writing.

And the poor chap whose work is to open the issue, Stasio Gl.<sup>10</sup>, swears and curses that he can't do a thing without a table... that he was never taught to draw on one knee, that there are no materials, that – as we say – "Well, damn me!"...

27 February

Passing out day... Preparations have been in progress for several days now. Yesterday, the Commander of the Army, General Anders, arrived on the parade ground. His imminent departure meant that he could not be present at the ceremonies celebrating the completion of the School courses. Exercises in motorised armoured vehicle drill were completed without fault.

From dawn, there has been an excited atmosphere throughout the camp district. In the morning we had mass, and then a march past where General P.<sup>11</sup> took the salute in the presence of officers from the top brass and delegates from the individual units. The order of the Brigade Commander was read out, bestowing upon us the title of officer cadets of armoured warfare, and diplomas were handed out...

In the afternoon, we entertained our guests from the morning's ceremonies with a glass or two of wine... Colleague T. spoke on behalf of the officer cadets... In blunt but powerful language, General P. outlined the tasks that await us and exhorted us "to maintain your fine soldiering spirit until the final battle for a Great Poland, whole and indivisible, is won. I can assure you, that then no one will dare decide the honour of Poland without Poland"...

Into the early hours, our guests laughed and clapped their hearts out in appreciation of the review the School had put on using its own resources. In particular, the song about Warsaw, performed by colleague Cz. made a great impression on the General. You could see the tears in his eyes...

That night, almost no one slept. In every tent, men conversed long into the morning hours over wine and passed comment on the promotions and assignments that had been communicated to us during the day...

And so ends the first stage of the road to Poland – perhaps the hardest stage, because of the difficulty in learning –of the School's Senior...

Officer Cadet<sup>12</sup> ZDZISŁAW ŁUKASIEWICZ

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<sup>10</sup> I think he was responsible for the drawing of General Paszkiewicz at the beginning of the magazine issue.

<sup>11</sup> General Gustaw Paszkiewicz (1892–1955), at the time commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Independent Armoured Brigade (i.e. the full unit to which these officer cadets belong). Amazingly, after the war he was a general in the Polish People's Army coordinating the security forces' operations against the anti-communist underground in the Białystok region! Speaking in the Polish parliament in 1947, he accused Anders of being instrumental in Sikorski's death...

<sup>12</sup> "Podchorąży" in Polish, where "chorąży" is equivalent to the old British Army rank of Ensign, so a podchorąży is waiting to make the transition to full officer rank ("porucznik" or Lieutenant in English). In the meantime, they are promoted through NCO ranks.