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Clear of People

Michal Iwanowski retraced the desperate 2000 km journey through wilderness his grandfather and great uncle made in 1945 after escaping from a prisoner-of-war camp in Russia. He talks to CCQ about their epic feat and why he felt compelled to document the journey for himself. words: **Ric Bower** and **Opal Turner**

My grandfather and grandmother were born in Vilnius, Lithuania. When the war broke out in 1939 they had to fight against the Germans. The Polish army was broken down quite quickly though. The boys, being quite boisterous, wanted to fight on but they didn't have an army to join, so my grandfather and his little brother spent a couple of years in the woods, around Vilnius area, fighting as partisans. In 1944 the Russian army came in and said to all those boys: 'If you put your arms down and join us, we can make one big army to fight the Germans...or else we can shoot you...'. There was no big army, of course, they were transported to Russia on trains and placed in a prison camp, near Kaluga, which is around two hours south of Moscow. My great uncle was sent

to a Gulag; he was working there in minus forty degrees centigrade, digging huts and chopping wood. My grandfather remained in the camp in Kaluga. Miraculously, a year later, they were brought together in Kaluga again.

Three days after my great uncle returned, in the evening, when they stopped working, they were supposed to cross the market square and go back to the barracks. They managed to stay behind, however. They hid out in a little chapel. My Granddad, his brother and two others crossed the river Aulka, which is very beautiful but really wide, using a boat which my grandad had seen earlier. They allowed themselves to float for two kilometres downstream in the current before landing on the opposite bank, hoping to throw the guards off their



2.

scent. Then they started walking.

They walked through the swamps, a beautiful part of Russia but there are no roads; the area is now a national park. They would walk at night, almost sleepwalking, because they were so tired. In the day two of them would sleep and two would sit and stay awake on guard. They were ambushed in Kojjosk by a patrol; there was a lot of shooting, and only my grandfather and his brother managed to escape. The other two guys were arrested or killed; to this day, no one knows what happened to them.

They kept getting lost. My grandfather had made a compass but because there was a lot of iron ore in that area of Russia the needle would just go crazy. In the end they used the stars to navigate. They had stolen some little pieces of dried bread and had a few sugar cubes. They would allow themselves just two sucks on a sugar cube each per day, to get some sugar in their system. They also found some berries

and mushrooms to supplement these meagre rations; they were far from being well nourished before they escaped but they were on the edge of starvation at that point. They always made sure they had matches; smoking was the only thing they had to numb the pain of their hunger. My grandfather tore his Achilles tendon. His lower leg swelled up like a balloon and he couldn't walk for three days. It had started snowing at this point.

They came across some railway tracks and waited by them for few days to observe where the trains slowed down. It took them many attempts to actually get on one because my grandfather could barely walk, let alone run. Their first lift took them a good 300km closer to home. From then it took them only about a month to get to Lithuania: it was

1945 by then. They arrived at their family home, but everyone was gone. When the Russians came in, it was a matter of 'get the hell out of here, this is ours now'. They found out from the neighbours, that the family had moved to Poland. When they finally made it there, after three months on the road, it was November. They found Mamma and Papa and their sister. My grandfather later found out that my grandmother was in a different town, and he went to get her from there, and of course they married and lived happily ever after.

In a strange way, going to Vilnius was a home-coming for me too. I had this really bold feeling of ownership. I wouldn't shout about it, because Lithuanians don't like Polskies! That part of Lithuania is very problematic, especially >>



3.

>> Vilnius, which was Polish for many years. I had this feeling that I knew the place; I didn't have any political claims to it, but the landscape, I recognised it straight away, the trees, the roads, the pines. I found a wonderful resource of emotions I hadn't accessed before.

My great uncle had written this little book, like a diary, of what happened to them. He had even made a map. I spent months and months looking at a map of Lithuania; I was looking at the roads, making little markings on it as to where I could go and what I could do. In August, last year, which is the same time roughly as they escaped, I went to Russia and I walked.

I avoided people, like they did, taking B roads or forest tracks, even going through fields. The thing with Google Earth is it doesn't show you the tips and peaks of the land, so sometimes something that looked to be a twenty minute walk was three hours up and down in mud up to your knees. There were a few nasty surprises, and there were times when I thought 'this is it, I'm going to catch a taxi to the next town'. 'Don't be such a sissy', I said to myself, 'these guys walked without proper shoes, at night, no map whatsoever and hungry as hell. And

I'm here with my iPhone and a full stomach and I am still complaining!' It worked out to be roughly a three week journey; where they took trains, I took trains. There were as many ways I tried to replicate their walk precisely. I tried to tap into their strength, into the collective memory.

There were some times, some wonderful moments, when a picture just appeared for me, but that didn't happen very often. I just walked from A to B and sometimes would see something that would just stop me. It was instinctive; I didn't plan the images, I just responded to what I saw. I was trying to avoid sensational photographs, you know, like a burnt-out car in the field, or burnt-out building. Many people helped me with the final edit of the images when I got back. They helped me to find the visual language I was looking for.

I spoke to my great uncle a few weeks ago, after my journey, I asked him 'how the hell did you guys do it?' He said 'we just got lucky'. For them



4.

1-4. from *Clear of People*, Michal Iwanowski, 2014

it wasn't anything profound, they were two boys who wanted to go home. We are so detached from danger nowadays.

It's very interesting because we all think that political systems have reached their 'final' stage: democracy. We think that nothing can be improved from here on in. But having moved from a land of raging Communism into a land of raging Capitalism, I catch myself thinking that I prefer some things from what I had before: like equal distribution of goods for instance. I work hard for my money now and I get upset if someone else doesn't work hard for it too; the huge bankers' bonuses for example. It's every man for himself, in that sense, here. How resourceful you are

determines what you can get. I don't like the competitiveness of it and it's very unjust on some people. I don't think Soviet communism worked either though. In many senses the sense of community has changed as well; people unite when they suffer under a common enemy and in our case it was the communist system we united and found community under. — **CCQ**

Clear of People was exhibited at Fotogalley in 2014 and Michal's journey was supported by the Arts Council of Wales.