

## A medal for surviving

Katherine Sawicki of London was among Poles shipped to Siberia by the Soviets

By KATE DUBINSKI

The Russians came early one morning, banging on the door of the family farm.

They ransacked everything.

"Get ready. You're going," they yelled. "Twenty minutes."

As her four terrified siblings cried, one Russian soldier told 10-year-old Katherine Sawicki's father, "Bring warm clothes for the children."

Today, tears well in the London woman's eyes as she recalls two years of hardship in Siberia, from 1940 to 1942, when her family was deported by Stalin's Soviets for one reason: they were Polish.

"They put us in cattle cars, locked us in, packed us in."

Sawicki received a medal from the Polish government recently for surviving the forced deportation. She was one of 1.7 million Poles shipped to Siberia between 1940 and 1942.

Sawicki, 79, lives in a bungalow near the Our Lady of Czestochowa Polish Catholic church on Hill Street.

She has a message for those falling on hard economic times. "You can survive. If you use your head and don't want much, you can survive. What you have, you have."

The day the Russians went to her village in southeast Poland is still vivid in her mind, as are the years of poverty that followed.

"In Siberia, the grownups had to work, and we had to go to school. And I mean, had to go to school. One day, when I didn't go, they sent my father to prison," Sawicki says.

"We learned Russian, and that there was no God," Sawicki says.

The families, about 10 to a barrack, were prohibited from speaking Polish. Ticks, mites and lice abounded. Beds were simple wooden boards.

Surrounded by forest and snow, there was no escape.

"You couldn't run. One guy tried, and they found him weeks later in the woods. He lost his mind."

Summer, though, brought berries and mushrooms -- and encounters with bears.



Katherine Sawicki wears a special commemorative medal given to her by the Polish government for surviving her Soviet-forced deportation from Poland as a child. (Susan Bradnam, Sun Media)

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"I made friends, and we had fun, like children do. But my mom said, 'Don't run too much, you'll get hungry.' There was nothing to eat," she says, her eyes filling with tears.

Then one day -- just like that -- Stalin made a pact with Poland's government in exile, granting amnesty to imprisoned Poles.

"People started leaving camp, but we couldn't go because my brother had injured his leg," Sawicki says.

Her father made a sling, and the family, cold and hungry, set out walking to a nearby village. Their clothes worn through, the family would pour water on rags and let them freeze over their feet -- makeshift shoes.

Finally, Sawicki's father was told trains were leaving with Polish refugees. The train station quickly filled up.

"We didn't know where we were going, but we knew it was freedom," Sawicki says.

Sawicki's mother, sick from starvation, died on that train to freedom.

"The doctor said we had two choices. Stay and bury her or come to freedom. We left my mom by the side of the train, covered in a blanket."

The train stopped at a port and the family learned they would cross the Caspian Sea to Iran.

Sawicki has pictures from those times, several months in a refugee camp outside Tehran, with people dying of diseases contracted in Siberia. But also school, scouts, friends. Then, more camps, in India, then Uganda.

After a time in England, Sawicki and her dad landed in Halifax, at Pier 21, in 1948 and began another journey -- this time to Saskatoon, where an aunt had settled in 1929.

Her father went to work on a farm, and she in a factory. In 1963, married and with three kids, Sawicki moved to London.

This month, she was one of several Polish people in Canada to receive a medal of recognition for her survival.

"It brought back so many memories," she says.

The medal is her most prized possession, Sawicki says. Before that, it was a scouting cross she earned in the Ugandan refugee camp.

"Back then, we had nothing. When you talk to people nowadays, and you say there was nothing, they can't comprehend it."