

# tragedy OF POLISH refugees

The livestock also traveled  
with their owners on  
a journey to a new home

The fate of the Borderlands people had been already decided. In November 1943 in Tehran, the „big three” (Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill) established the eastern border of Poland. Before it was officially confirmed in Yalta and Potsdam (1945), in September 1944 the PKWN established in Moscow concluded agreements with the Soviet Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian republics on the resettlement of the Polish population. In December 1944, the first transport of Polish repatriates set off from Ukraine.

## Remove the Poles

The authorities of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic wanted to get rid of the Polish population as soon as possible. Frightened by Ukrainian nationalists, still prowling with axes, the Poles, afraid of being arrested and deported to Siberia, packed their belongings and headed out to the railway station. Sometimes, however, they camped for weeks waiting for transport, because they often could not come back to their own houses. In Lithuania and Belarus, for a change, at some point the authorities began to impede repatriation,

longings  
railway

to the agreement, they were allowed to take two tons of luggage per family, including livestock. Sometimes they waited at railway stations for months, often without the possibility of cooking food, sheltering from rain or cold, and exposed to robberies. They were robbed both by representatives of local authorities who demanded unpaid taxes and various armed gangs. More than once, they lost not only all their belongings but also their lives. Often, officials also ordered a quarantine for animals, and that was when the train was already at the station. The migrant did not know what to do in all of this: wait for the animals or go? He chose the latter because there were only a few wagons available. In addition, they were dirty, full of insects, and damaged. They traveled mainly in open coals cars and platforms called gondola cars, which did not provide protection against rain, snow, or wind. No wonder then that those journeys, which often lasted many weeks, took a tragic toll. People traveled in crowds with cattle, chi-

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## On enemy soil

Getting there didn't mean the end of problems. Migrants were most often removed from the train at some station or near them, where they had to stay for some time in the so-called destinations organized by branches of the State Repatriation Office (PUR). There - sometimes after many weeks of waiting - they were assigned a farm and transported to their new homes. According to the assumptions of the Ministry of Recovered Territories, the inhabitants of the Vilnius Region, Grodno Region, Polesie and Podlasie were to be sent to Warmia and

Masuria, Western Pomerania, and Poznańskie. From Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, people were relocated mainly to Upper and Lower Silesia and the Lubuskie province. However, in reality, the paths of the Polish borderlanders did not go as the authorities wanted. The repatriates changed transports and plans and looked for a place to live, not necessarily where they had been dropped off. They preferred to settle in central Poland, closer to their small homelands and close to their families. Many of them had at least one there. They also often traveled throughout the western lands, looking for the best accommodation. The principle of „peasants to villages, townspeople to cities” was also often violated. Therefore, the rural population assembled in henhouses, pigsties, barns, and apiaries in the yards of townhouses.

## Their own house

The migrants were theoretically the first to join farms or former German real estates. But in reality, they often waited over a month for an allocation. Settlers from central Poland also counted on taking over

the former German properties, and they were the ones who usually won. PUR's efforts to regulate this have had no effect. Only the intervention of the Ministry of the Recovered Territories changed something. Having said that, new inhabitants in former German villages, were not always able to find themselves there. They did not know the amenities they found here. The abandoned and inhabited lands were often separated by a civilization gap. Agricultural machinery and other „German inventions” landed on a pile of junk. Devices, such as sewage systems, were devastated. „It was like entering a new world: the road that had been paved so far turned into asphalt, the wooden huts disappeared. The houses were brick, red brick and tiled. It was something unfamiliar”... - one of the repatriates recalling the crossing of the border between Poland and former Prussia.

## Living out of suitcases

The repatriates did not know how long they would have to live in the new place, so they did not try to put down roots. They feared the return of the Germans or the outbreak of a new war. So for years, they were living out of suitcases, waiting for their return to Borderlands. The war experiences showed that nobody cared about the civilian population anymore. People coming to the new territories saw not only the destruction but also the plunder of property by the Russians and looters. „Everything that was in the houses had to be taken to a special point. Furniture, machines, and devices were brought there. These goods were later loaded onto wagons and transported to Russia,” said one of those relocated to Lower Silesia many years later. This happened despite the fact that, under the agreement signed between the Provisional Government of National Unity of the Republic of Poland and the government of the USSR, the latter „relinquished to Poland all claims to German property and other assets.”

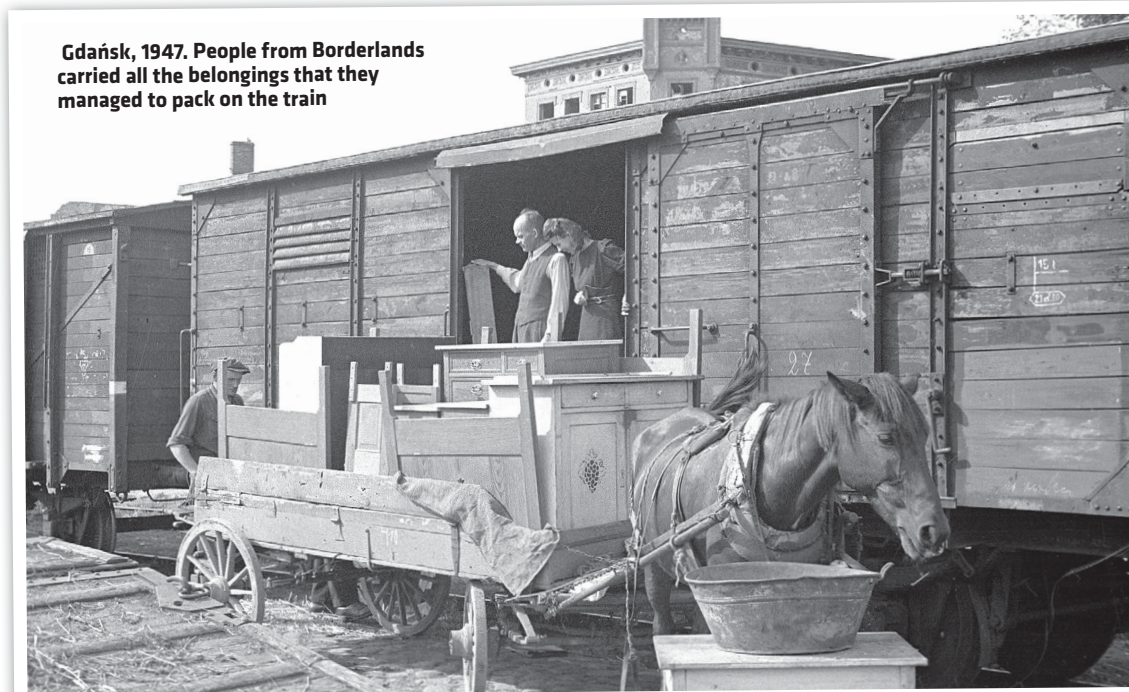
## SETTLEMENT CONDITIONS

The displaced people were provided with compensation for property left behind (land, real estate) in the form of a farm or municipal property. In practice, some of the displaced people received a new, sometimes much better home, while others received much less or nothing.

especially in the case of rural residents, fearing a decline in agricultural production. So farmers were not allowed to register until they plant the seeds. And then it often turned out that after the sowing it was too late to register, or there were no wagons for the registered ones and they had to wait.

## The Migration

The displaced people, equipped with evacuation cards, with all their be-



Gdańsk, 1947. People from Borderlands carried all the belongings that they managed to pack on the train