

**Voldemars Veldre was born the 13<sup>th</sup> of June 1917 in Russia. His parents were Latvian refugees from the first Latvian War. The family went back to Latvia in 1920. Mr. Veldre graduated from Jelgava Gymnasium. Having become a corporal in the spring of 1938 and hereafter sent to a warrant officers course he graduated from officer's school the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 1940 as a Lieutenant of the first independent Latvian Army. He served in the 3<sup>rd</sup> infantry regiment in Jelgava and was arrested on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1941. After the release in 1956 he returned to Jelgava and worked in a sugar factory as a mechanic. In 1972 he retired but he participated actively in the reconstruction of the Latvian Officer's Union.**

## **Surviving the Soviet Occupation**

**By Mr. Voldemars Veldre, retired 1<sup>st</sup> Lt of Latvian Army.**

**I** want to begin the story of my life in the spring of 1937 where my adult life began after graduating from Jelgava Gymnasium in Latvia. I wanted to attend university but I did not have the required money. Instead I joined the Army on a voluntary basis because my conscription was coming up any way. I did not fear the toughness of the military service because from an early age I had been used to hard labor. On October 17<sup>th</sup> 1937 my military service began as I was enlisted in

the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment situated in Liepaja. Most of the other conscripts were graduates from gymnasiums and universities.

The German aggressive policy from the late 1930'es had an enormous impact on most states around the world and certainly on all states in the Baltic area. In the spring of 1938 Hitler's Army started to pillage Europe and occupy independent countries. Very soon the Sudeten Mountains in Czechoslovakian were occupied and

soon thereafter Klaipeda in Lithuania was also occupied. When German submarines were detected in Latvian territorial waters Latvia had to prepare its military in order to defend its independence. International tension was growing day by day.

We were encouraged to attend military academy because Latvia was in shortage of officers. After passing the medical check-up and the military school's entrance examination I was enlisted in the military academy as a cadet.

The USSR was preparing actively for war and one of the most significant aggressive acts of the Soviet foreign policy was the signing of the secret annexes to the Molothow-Ribentroph Pact. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1939 the Second World War began with the occupation of Poland. The soviet aggression against Finland failed but the Baltic States were forced to accept soviet military bases within their territories. In my opinion the Latvian government made a huge mistake by accepting the deployment of soviet military bases. We knew that the result of this was a loss of Latvian independence at a time when the Latvian population was more than ready to fight for freedom.

The military studies were suspended and the military camp in Daugavpils was evacuated and deployed to Baldone in Latvia. We followed the developments closely as the situation changed every day. President Ulmanis together with the Latvian government were subverted and the Stalinist henchmen Kirhenstein and Lacis seized power in Latvia. The Army underwent significant changes as well.

Retired general Dambitis was nominated to Minister of Defence and retired general Klavins was appointed commander of the army. The commandant of the military academy was replaced and the Latvian flag was removed from the academy. The cadets received a message saying that graduation would be on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 1940. After the ceremonies the graduates were given our new assignments and I was assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> infantry regiment in Jelgava in Latvia. The commander, Colonel Apsitis of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry regiment placed the 14 new officers in different sub-units and I became an anti-tank platoon commander.

In September 1940 the Latvian Army was reorganized and incorporated in the Soviet Army. The higher commanders were liquidated and the Latvian officers with a record of service during the existence of the Latvian Republic were retired together with those who fought for independence in 1919. At least 20-25 officers from the 3<sup>rd</sup> infantry regiment including Colonel Apsitis were retired and Colonel Aunins was appointed as the new commander.

In my battery large changes also took place. The Latvian Army was abolished and the names of the regiments were changed. The 3<sup>rd</sup> infantry regiment was united with the 6<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment stationed in Riga and renamed as the 195<sup>th</sup> riflemen regiment which later on was absorbed in the 181<sup>st</sup> division of the Baltic military region. As a result of these reorganizations a lot of Latvian officers handed in their resignation. Others stayed due to the promise from officers in the Red Army that there would be no other changes in the service conditions for Latvians apart from the change of uniform and the names of the units. History clearly underlines the falseness of these promises.

At a later point in time special political officers, the "politruks", arrived at the 195<sup>th</sup> regiment under the leadership of Political Commissar Bisenieks. Within a few days the "politruks" were incorporated into each unit and they functioned as the eyes and ears of the Stalin regime. Shortly after they began to arrest Latvian officers and soldiers. The arrests took place during the nights to avoid too much public atten-

tion and resistance. The Red Army “Chekists” registered every Latvian officer and no one knew who were to be arrested next.

At the end of January 1941 the 195<sup>th</sup> riflemen regiment were to have a shooting exercise at the relocated Lilaste-Gauja training area instead of the area in Kuldiga. I was appointed senior officer of the march-column heading for Kuldiga, and my assistant was a “politruk” Poznakov from our battery. During the march he fully ignored all of my commands and was very lazy and a dastard. This was the first conflict between us and the episode puts in perspective the function a “politruk” would have in a unit. Such episodes became more and more common and they were all provoked by the “politruks”. After returning to Kuldiga the 76<sup>th</sup> battery commander 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Spuris assigned me again as a platoon commander of an anti tank platoon in the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion in Ivande in Latvia.

From March until the beginning of June 1941 our regiment was relocated in Aluksne in Latvia and in June we went on a summer camp in Litene and Ostroviesi

in Latvia. Our artillery regiment arrived in Ostroviesi on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June and Commissar Bisenieks was ordered to leave all ammunition outside the camp area in order to prevent soldiers from stealing it. The next day we established the camp and the only thing that went on was the Red Army having an exercise with troops some 300-400 meters away from the camp. The camp was encircled three times during the course of this exercise. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1941 orders came from commissar Bisenieks and the deputy commander captain Beilinson that I should report to the HQ at 8.00 with a map, a compass and a pistol in order to take part in a tactical exercise called “Company in Defence Positions”. Some of our officers and a lot of “politruks” were already there when I arrived a little early. Trucks with other officers from our region passed by while we waited for a pick up that would take us to the exercise area. On our way to Gulbene in Latvia we were stopped by a General from the Red Army and ordered to turn right down a country road. At a closer inspection we noticed that

Russian soldiers were hiding in the bushes along the road and pointing their weapons in our direction.

A large number of Russian officers were waiting for us when we arrived at the destination in the woods. One of them a KGB colonel came to our truck and ordered us out and into lines where the content of the exercise would be explained. He then ordered the officers to come closer in order to be able to hear him. The KGB officer positioned himself opposite us and opened fire without any warning. He then yelled three times: “Put your hands up”.

We were armed with pistols but they were not of much use because they were without ammunition. They forced us to surrender when they put a pistol against our backs. Then they took our pistols, watches and other personal belongings but fortunately a Russian general ordered an end to this maltreatment. We were given back our personal belongings but not our knives and pistols.

We went to Gulbene station guarded by the “politruks” and put into Black

Maria trucks normally used for arrested people. 14 years of long torture started. 43 officers from the 195<sup>th</sup> riflemen regiment and in total more than 560 officers were arrested during that day. We arrived in Riga the next day and train wagons with arrested Lithuanian and Estonian officers were added to our train. Later the same day we departed Riga in the direction of Daugapils. The border was crossed during the night and on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 1941 after three days of traveling the train stopped at Babino station in Russia. Two hours later we walked in unknown direction guarded by "chekists". At the end of the day we reached a built-up area which we later found out was a manor house in Johnova. The camp we arrived at was divided in three parts. The first part contained arrested and deported women from Latvia, in the second one men from Riga were placed and the third contained arrested Polish army officers. We stayed in Johnova until the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 1941 when we were forced to walk the 30-km back to Babino station. The next day we headed in Black Maria trucks towards Moscow.

At that time we knew nothing of the breakout of the war between USSR and Germany but that we learned about when we reached the station in Moscow where our guards immediately took shelter because the alarms were going.

The trip to Krasnojarsk in Russia was very slow and at every station military echelons passed us in a westward direction. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1941 we reached Krasnojarsk and after a couple of days the journey continued in a northern direction along the river Yenisei.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 1941 the violent journey ended in the frozen grounds of Norilsk in Russia. Here we were in the hands of a real "chekist" sadist who was in total control of our lives. The interrogation officer were selected killers without any moral limitations. With lupine and cruel interrogation methods they could force anybody to confess any fictional crimes.

My first interrogator hit and kicked me for three days and tried many different vicious types of interrogation on me because I refused to sign the interroga-

tion protocol. I kept saying that I did not understand Russian and that a translator was required. The torture continued but I never signed the interrogation protocol. I was not interrogated again until June 1942 when the KGB tortured 20 men. This time my interrogator was a border guard officer and the difference was very clear. He only used physical force against me twice. My last interrogation was on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May 1943. I was called to the office of the KGB and here I was forced to sign a verdict, which imprisoned me for 8 years. It was formulated according to the law and "proved" that I was showing antagonistic attitudes towards the Soviet power. I later found out that this meant that I had been an active fighter against the revolutionary movement.

In 1956 I applied for vindication at the military public prosecutor of the Baltic Military Region. Prosecutor Kosenko told me that I had successfully avoided the death penalty by not signing the interrogation protocols in 1941. In 1957 I received my vindication but still I was under constant KGB observance.