

The Long Walk

by Slavomir Rawicz (1956)

He was in prison for being in the Polish Cavalry. The prison interrogator was merciless after a year he still wouldn't sign a false confession of guilt so they drugged him into doing it. Then they found him guilty of espionage & sentenced him to 25 forced labor in Siberia. He had not a shower, shave or haircut in a year he was in solitary confinement. 50 men left Moscow in a cattle truck to the train station in the winter of '40-41. The train moved stealthily at night along the Trans-Siberian RR for a month covering 3000 miles. At Irkutsk the 5000 men got out and walked (at night) another 1000 miles north. They were chained together in groups of 100. 3 blizzards took its toll since more than 10% died on the march alone. The supply trucks could go no farther & reindeer sleds took over.

Camp 303 was closer to the Arctic Circle than they would like. They had to build their own barracks. They were given 500g of bread per day. Those on special duty would get more. It seemed that the guards were sent there as well for some indiscretion. He volunteered to fix the commander's radio & met the commander's wife. She encouraged him to escape when her husband was to be relocated. She even gave him an ax head, knife & sacks. He put together a team of 7 & started saving food rations & warmer clothes.

One April night they escaped, dragging an old sheepskin they found to throw off the dog's smell. They ran for 10 hours to create as much distance between them & the camp. The shortest route would be to go east to the ocean & catch a boat to freedom, but that's where the Russians would look for them. They went south to India (4000+ miles & 12 months later). They reached Lake Baikal in about a month, where they found a girl, who escaped the massacre of her family. She came with them.

They found a deer with his antlers stuck in a bush & later a potato field. They avoided civilization, but would go to take some food. Mid-June they reached the Mongolian border where they met a caravan of traders. This was about 1200 miles in 60 days. A Chinese farmer gave them watermelons, another fish.

Then came the Gobi Desert, where Kristina died. It was truly a sad day for all the men, who came to love her like a sister. Then one of the men died. The rest barely came out alive before they entered China, then Tibet by Oct. They found a Sheppard who fed them. Tibetan villagers were friendly & gave of their limited resources. They spent their nights in the villages or in caves. To sleep in the open without a fire was death. Another of them died in the mtns. Wool helped keep them warm. The Himalayas were unrelenting. Just as soon as you thought you were at the top, you saw another mtn to climb. They saw the Abominable Snowman.

Finally, British troops found them in India. They had to burn their clothes, shave their heads (lice) before they could take them to the hospital. They were given sedatives & slept for a month. They would hoard food under their pillows.

He lost his home in Poland when FDR gave the Eastern Block to Russia at the end of WWII. England allowed him to rebuild his life there.

