

Zoltan Shtern



This is a picture of me after I was released from Gulag and returned to Subcarpathia. The photo was taken in Svaliava in 1948. We heard about life in the USSR after the Revolution of 1917. Unfortunately, we only had access to the official propaganda: radio and newspapers. I imagined the USSR to be a country of equal possibilities, freedom and justice. On 20th August 1940 I left home without even saying goodbye to my parents. On the night of 21st August we got to the border with the USSR. The guide took us to the border, showed us the way and returned home. We crossed the border, took a nap and decided that we had to look for a frontier guard. The frontier guards found us before we found them. We were glad at first, but then our joy ebbed away when they ordered us, 'Stand up, line up, a step to the left, a step to the right shall be considered as an effort to escape and then we shall apply our weapons'. I will never forget these words. My other life began

on 21st August 1940. From then on I spent seven years in various Gulag camps. On 30th January 1947 the director of Burkhala camp called me. He looked confused and said that he had already had problems since my sentence had been over for a long time and I was still kept in the camp. I was sent to the human resource department of the mine to obtain documents. I didn't quite know the way. They just explained to me that I had to cross a pass in the mountains and turn a few times before I came to the village. It was a miracle that's hard to describe: for the first time in many years I had no armed escort - I was free! I don't think I felt cold. In the human resource department I obtained the certificate of release from the camp and a job assignment to work in Burkhala mine as an employee. The date of release in my document is 30th January 1947. I returned to the office of the chief engineer in Burkhala. He asked me where I wanted to work and I answered that I wanted to return home. He explained to me that I only had the right to live in Kolyma. Finally I received permission to go home. In October 1948 I left for Subcarpathia. I left Kolyma in February and only in October, eight months later, did I manage to reach home.