

Survival Stories: 98-Year-Old Ukrainian Woman Flees the Front Line on Foot & The Long Walk

98-year-old Lidia Lomikovska awoke to gunfire all around her home. The ever-changing front line had moved right over their home. The household members determined that the best course of action was to flee. In the chaos of the bugout, Lidia was separated from the rest of her family. Alone, she walked all day without food or water until she ran into Ukrainian forces, who put her in touch with a police organization that was helping displaced persons relocate to safe areas in Ukraine farther from the front lines. (Press, 2024)

Lessons Learned

At her advanced age, it is incredible that Lidia survived and was able to make it away from the immediate threat on her own. Lidia's survival ordeal has lessons for would-be survivors of any age.

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Who Survives Disasters and Survival Ordeals?

It seems every survival writer has an answer for this question. Movies and TV would have you believe that only the strongest survive. However, if one studies the facts of real-world survival ordeals, the answer is that all kinds of people survive disasters and survival ordeals. The survival of some, like Lidia, is attributable to preparation, possession of an indomitable will to survive, toughness, a sense of humor, and the ability to assess their situation, create a plan, and execute it, while others stand paralyzed by fear or normalcy bias.

The survival of others, however, is attributable only to sheer luck. They survive not by any detectable effort of their own, and often even though they endangered themselves and others. These are the drunks who survive even though they wander into sniper alleys and stop for a cigarette. Then you have those who survive ordeals that would not have occurred were it not for their own poor judgement or lack of preparation. I will refrain from naming names, but I'm sure you have read about a couple, but survival ordeals are often precipitated by some event, can be natural or random or can be caused by man, often a human error or a series of them.

Adaptations – Here are some of the adaptations that Lidia used to stay alive:

- **She brought her cane** – Survivalists with mobility problems must plan for them, whether that means a cane, walker, wheelchair, or something else. Even those who normally walk without any impediment could face mobility problems during a survival ordeal due to injury. A pair

of telescoping trekking poles may be enough to keep you moving in the right direction and can serve as tent poles for a poncho or tarp shelter when you stop to rest or camp. Families should also plan ways to carry infants and toddlers on foot. This could be as simple as a bedsheet tied to carry an infant and a Go Bag for the baby. Where possible, families should also make use of the wheel, using a bicycle, garden cart, wheelchair, hand cart, or an off-road baby jogger to carry non-ambulatory kids or adults and their associated equipment and supplies.

- **Improvised a second cane from a piece of splintered wood** – Deciding her one cane was insufficient, Lidia improvised a second one from a scrap of splintered wood. Folks who can normally get by with one cane may find that two is better suited to a long trek in an emergency. In addition to preventing falls, a pair of canes or trekking poles can temporarily shift some of the strain from the back and legs momentarily, increasing endurance, especially when carrying a pack. Even a branch or scrap of wood can serve as a cane, crutch, or hiking staff in an emergency.
- **She used the OODA loop** – OODA stands for Observe, Orient, Decide, Act. The tool was designed for fighter pilots, but simply describes the process humans use to solve problems. She assessed her situation, made sense of the facts, created a plan, executed it, evaluated her progress, adjusted, and repeated the cycle. After a fall in some weeds, Lidia fell asleep, then woke and determined she must keep walking. After a second fall, she got up and resolved to keep walking “bit by bit” or a little at a time.

The Long Walk

The Long Walk is the ghostwritten story of a Polish officer who escaped a Russian Gulag with an American and five others who traveled by foot from Siberia, South through the Taiga, across the Gobi Desert, up over the Himalayas and into British India in 1942. (Rawicz, 1956) The problem with the book is that it's a case of stolen valor. The man who told the story isn't the man who actually made the trip. Researchers believe that Slavomir Rawicz read the story while working in the Polish Embassy in England. Like many, I did not know this when I read the book. I only learned the truth after doing additional research.

It is not unusual for survival stories that get international coverage to be ghostwritten. It is unusual for accounts to read like epic novels, and it is extremely unusual for survivors to claim to have seen bigfoot or the abominable snowmen, so its not like there weren't red flags that the story had been embellished. Either the writer couldn't resist, and Mr. Rawicz obliged him, or they were both in on it from the get-go. Either is possible.

There is evidence that the basic story itself is true, that three men survived just such a journey. Rupert Mayne, a British intelligence officer in Calcutta, reported to have interviewed three emaciated men in 1942 who claimed to have escaped from Siberia.

Polish WWII veteran Witold Gliński came forward and claimed the story was his and that he was the man who escaped 4,000 miles on foot to British India. Unfortunately, not a lot of evidence has been discovered that proves or disproves Gliński's version of events. It sad to hear cases of stolen valor and exaggerated bona fides. They have been damaging to both the military and the survival movement.

Lessons Learned

Let's examine what we can learn from the story, from both Rawicz and Witold Głiński, what rings true when compared to thousands of other survival ordeals, and what doesn't.

Worn and Lost Equipment

The survivor lost his knife. Lost equipment is a standard feature of survival ordeals. Whether hunters wander away from firearms after setting them down or knives falling overboard at sea, when pain, blood loss, hunger, exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and dehydration take their toll, survivors seldom operate anywhere near 100% and one of the results of this is that is lost equipment.

A feature of long-term ordeals is worn equipment, especially ordeals in the first half of the 20th century or earlier, when people spent a much greater percentage of income on clothing and footwear. Everyone knew how to sew, but clothing, cloth, footwear and sewing needles, were all rationed during WWII, so it was common for the clothing of civilians and POWs to wear out or be appropriated for the war effort. The fact that they had to frequently repair clothing and footwear rang true.

He Received Help

Głiński claimed that the wife of the Commissar of the gulag befriended him when he came to work on her radio. She helped him plan the escape and gave him information and a package which contained new footwear, hand knitted socks, dried meat, and long underwear.

Receiving outside help or help from other prisoners is a feature of most, but not all, prison escapes I have researched.

Stealing Supplies

The author claimed that on their entire journey, aside from stealing from the Gulag, they only helped themselves to the property of another one time. The fact that they stole supplies, rings true. A group of men only stealing food once over a 4,000-mile journey, is much harder to believe.

The Other Men in the Escape

On this point, the stories of Rawicz and Gliński disagree. Rawicz claimed the six other men were chosen and Gliński says that when he tunneled under the wire, they simply came out of the woodwork and followed him.

Seeing the Abominable Snowman

Rawicz really was a Polish officer and really went to a prison camp, but former Soviet records, including statements by Rawicz himself (some in his own handwriting), contradict the idea that he escaped. (Levinson, 2006) According to the records, he was released in 1942, as part of general amnesty for Poles, and sent to a camp in Iran. Poland was occupied by Russia, after war, he wisely chose to stay in England. (Wikipedia, 2024)

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At the time the book was written, the search for the abominable snowman was a big deal. It was all over the news in

England, where Rawicz lived after the war. Quiet simply, the idea was selling a lot of books, which was probably the motivation for selling the story he read in the Embassy as his own. I'm sure adding a sighting of the abominable snowman couple was irresistible to Rawicz and his ghostwriter.

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