

Case No. 5

Stenogram of conversation with ballet dancer of the Riga opera and ballet theater S. I. Lepin

3 pages.

[1.1]

Commission on the Compilation of a Chronicle of the Great Patriotic War.

Stenogram of conversation with comrade Sergey Ivanovich Lepin

Conversation conducted by
Senior researcher,
Candidate of Historical
Sciences R. I. Golubeva.
Stenographer: A.A. Bondarenko

Riga

December 10, 1944

Ballet dancer of the Riga opera and ballet theater, year of birth 1903,
father Latvian, mother Russian,
non-party, education –
3 years of the Academy of Arts.¹

I have been working at the theater for 19 years. There was a one-year break during the occupation period.

I was born in Riga. My father was a people's teacher.² He came from the countryside. During that war³ I lived and studied in Tver at a realschule. When I came here, I was admitted to the Academy of Arts. A good impression remains from Tver. There were very warm people there.

In 1941, I was a member of a union local committee. *When the Germans occupied Riga, I feared arrest.* I ran away from home ~~two days before~~ [1 word is crossed out]. They came to me to search. They were searching for weapons. During the search they forced my mother and landlord to be present. They dug up the whole apartment and took nothing but photographs. I rode away by bicycle to acquaintances in the northern part of Latvia. My mother said that she did not know my exact address and that I had left to work. I left because I felt that the ground beneath my feet was already burning. It turned out that I had left in good time. I lived with my acquaintances for half a year, but they somehow didn't snatch me up and

the comrades did not give me up. Apparently they wanted to arrest me because I had been in the union local committee and because I was a performer. I also went to pick up the wounded during the 2-3 days of the war that I stayed here. This was also criminal from the point of view of the Germans - to pick up wounded Red Army men. Once lists of all who had been fired appeared, I did not go back to the theater again. Sometimes I came home by bicycle. I would bring something for the family and leave again. It continued like this for half a year. I could not stay there longer because the labor exchange started becoming interested in the unemployed, and many in Riga knew me. I am a ballet soloist, so it was dangerous for me to remain without work, and I got set up in the forestry department through this one engineer. I worked there for around half a year. Then I went to Libava.⁴ A tiny theater opened there and they hired me to dance for them. Unfortunately, the theater existed for only three months. They closed it because a lot of Russians ended up there. I was again left without work. I returned [1.2] to Riga and again went to the forestry department. They told me that, for political reasons, I couldn't be hired. I came to Libava. They called me to the political police, interrogated me, and let me go. Some comrades of mine offered to vouch for me so that I could get a job. But I was very hurt and myself did not want to go work anywhere, because you have to go through several commissions and kind of ask for forgiveness, and I did not want to be involved in this. I went to Libava again, where our Vasilyev lived. He helped me get a job and I worked for two years there, at the theater. The director there was a German, but decent as a director. He really regretted that he was a party⁵ man. We took the whole ballet to Germany one time, to Memel. There the Austrians told us interesting things in a very joyous tone: "Oh, today they bombed Berlin, soon the war will end." "When the Germans have nothing to eat, then the war will end." This was an Austrian chauffeur who said these things.

Or this little scandal. Into the premises where I slept for the night, where the performers and soldiers were (we stayed there for a week), they stuck German soldiers. The Germans would ask us: "What did the Bolsheviks do by you? Is what our propaganda tells us true?" This was a typical question for Germans expressing distrust regarding their leadership.

At the end of July 1944, Mitava⁶ was taken. I ran away on this day. There were no trains. I told the director that my child was sick and that he had to be taken to Libava. He let me go, and I returned to Riga via a roundabout route through Tuksum.⁷

In Libava there were a lot of people who had been fired from work in Riga. There were 4 people from the ballet, fired due to political and personal motives. They did this so that there would simply not be unpleasant people who don't obey. There were a few people from among the singers, for example, union local committee chairperson Vasilyev. There was also Pelkalnitis, she was one of the

choirgirls. In 1942-1943 and in 1943-1944 there weren't any strong performers in Libava. They said that there was a blacklist, but we were helped by the fact that the director was a party man. They took me as a desired dancer - without any kind of political reference, and without any going through the directorate of artistic affairs that existed under the Germans.

When the Red Army took Mitava, a panic began in Libava. Before this, the Germans had felt confident. When the panic began, I stole away from there and it is hard for me to say what happened there after that. They closed the theater, like in Riga, and took everyone to the trenches. One colleague came a week before the coming of Soviet power to Libava. He observed how a German hit one singer on the back with a club because he kind of zoned out a little while working in the trenches. But in general there were also honest people among the Germans. Many Germans themselves cursed Hitler. The Austrians in particular cursed him. There was one naval officer, an Austrian. He finished the cadet corps in Austria and held the rank of captain. The Germans wanted to force him to take the exam a second time. He would not do this for anything. They put the man down with their foolish treatment, thereby turning their own brotherly nations by blood against themselves. From the point of the view of the Germans, only a pure-blooded German was a person.

[1.3]

Others are worth nothing.

I was an eyewitness of mass shootings in the first half year, when I was hiding in the countryside. In 1941, before Christmas, one Sunday at 2 o'clock, in broad daylight, the Germans were carrying out a mass shooting at the edge of the highway in a small woodlet. It was maybe 200 meters from the highway, past the hillock, so it was visible. I was approaching the city from the direction of Semaspils station.⁸ I am approaching Riga and at approximately the 10th kilometer from Riga, in a small woodlet, more likely a copse, shooting could be heard. At first I thought they were training soldiers. Then I see 3 machine guns standing there, then a police automobile-truck. In it they are carrying people. Suddenly I hear frantic cries. I almost fell from my bicycle. Such cries can only happen when a woman dies a death that is not her own. I saw a comfortable limousine, around which officers were strolling, even with young ladies, it seems. These were people who were looking for strong sensations and who were present during the shooting of Jews. About 300 meters from the highway were about 100-150 people, mainly women. This was a mass shooting of Jews. They simply ordered the Jews to gather at a designated point and explained that they would take them to a different place. Then they piled up all of their things, undressed everyone to full nudity or to their underwear, and shot them. People relayed horrific things: children, allegedly, they wrapped in a sheet and then inundated with machine gun fire. It was typical that they did this in broad daylight, when people go by and say: "Yes, they are shooting the Jews. Well, what

can one do?" Such barbaric conversations took place. In all of Latvia only 125 Jews remained. (*These numbers are not verified. These figures are allegedly for Riga. R. Golubeva*)⁹ The only Jew whom the Germans spared was the world-renowned conductor Leo Blech.¹⁰ They put him on an aeroplane and took him away to Sweden. They shot not only Jews, of course. At the end of 1942 there were also gas vans. I saw these trucks, which went around the city.

Maria Saletis-Nedrite was among the fallen comrades. She was very active *under Soviet power*. The misfortune is in that she was in the MOPR.¹¹ It was in general the case that, if you were not in the MOPR, you were fortunate. I even didn't know much about it and thought MOPR was something along the lines of the MTS.¹² During the interrogation in Libava, the first thing they asked me was: "Were you in the MOPR?"

They nabbed me in the forest, searched me, and I wriggled out with great difficulty.

They grabbed one ballerina and held her in prison for half a year. She told me that if they put her in prison another time, then death would be preferable. But the Germans grabbed her a second time and took her away to Germany.

There was the Jew Shelkans - a wonderful singer and dancer. Until the most recent time, he was seen in the city either in an automobile or loading firewood. The last time I saw him, he was in a column. He is a very likeable person. At first he was a master watchmaker, and then went to study.

Then there was Viktor Podleshchik, a Komsomol¹³ member. In the final days he tried to leave ~~at least~~ by foot. There is no further more information on him.

He ran after his mother and I don't know anything else [l.4] about him. That was June 27, 1941.

Malke - that was a Latvian and an activist. He was in the Workers' Guard.¹⁴ He was taken as a prisoner of war. He was taken with his whole team. He was wounded and they took him wounded. Later, I found out that he is in Sauspils.¹⁵ ~~It turns out he and his wife divorced, and his wife left to the countryside.~~ Then there was information that he was not in Sauspils. Thus, one can also count him as fallen.

Then, Nina Simanovich died - a Jew. Tatyana Babina - a Jew who was roughly snatched. They beat her up during her arrest and took her away. Then Stupelns died - a singer. Vilmanis - principal soloist, who sat in prison, from where he was sent off to Germany. Supposedly, he sang there at first. He has a wonderful voice. The Germans tried to do everything in their power. For example, the director of the Libava theater would say that when the war ends, he will take him all over the whole world. Nikolai Vasilyev was in prison, and then worked in Libava at the theater.

Mirtsa Gritte, prima ballerina, was also arrested. They took her at the theater, and now she is in Germany. She was on the blacklist. She got married under the

Germans. People warned her, telling her to hide, but she had an infant and could not hide anywhere.

Those who had been imprisoned before already felt that they were in a bad position. On that attestation that they would get from the Germans upon release from prison, it was written: "So and so is held in prison on political grounds, but the German command found it possible to release him." And then the following note: "He can only be arrested again by order of the German police in such a case, where there is some kind of danger (that is, danger for the Germans)."

Grautsal' was also in prison. Altogether about 40 people were affected. Some were killed, others arrested. I know one woman who left voluntarily only because she feared arrest. I say: "Where are you going, huh? I'm in the same situation and I'm not leaving." She says: "You're a different case, you're a man, but I can't hide anymore" (she hid for 4 days). I also spent more time in the attic during the final days.

(Bunka: I also hid from arrest in pits.¹⁶)

Toward the end ~~they~~ *the Germans* put out a military mobilization order. This order stated: "All men born in 1893 or younger have to show up on such and such a day to such and such a place and such and such a place." About 10-20 people came, but no more. These were already those days when they caught people on the street. At first they took the younger ones. Then they would take everybody. They snatched everybody, without warning. Later, in the evening, they announced on the radio: "Relatives searching for their husbands can bring warm clothes and go themselves, but it will not be possible to live together in Germany."

When the Red Army came, it was greeted very joyously in Riga. Some in my building hid in root cellars and trenches. Then everything quieted down and everyone came out to see what [1.5] was going on. This was at night. ~~There was already snow.~~ The Germans threw out a proclamation for the Red Army during their retreat: "Germany will win nevertheless." The Soviet government they referred to as "this Jewish government." Not many men would appear on the streets, but old women watched the arrival of the Red Army. I saw my first Red Army man at 3 o'clock in the morning. It was predawn. All of the passable courtyards and gates were blocked up and locked in such a way for the Germans to not be able to pass, but we observed what was happening on the streets through the crevices. But there were few people left. For example, we had about 70 people left in two big buildings. People thought that the Germans would burn and blow up everything. They thought it best to leave to the forest, but they were afraid that they would search with dogs. But they were not able to do this.

When they began to blow up the huge warehouse beyond the Dvina, we understood that the Germans had left and we crawled out of the shelters. Artillery firing sounded beyond the Dvina.

When our aviation's raid began, I climbed onto the roof. I felt so joyous when I saw the red stars on the airplanes. We were sure that bombs would not be dropped on Riga, except perhaps if something accidentally happened. Something accidental, of course, did occur. But in general, they really were careful with us. I slept soundly during the raid.

Senior researcher R. Golubeva [l.6]

¹ The Latvian Academy of Arts, located in Riga and founded in 1919.

² "People's teacher" most likely refers to teachers in the Russian Empire who taught at zemstvo schools. The "people's teacher" would be teaching at a rural school for children aged eight to twelve.

³ This must refer to World War I.

⁴ Libava was the pre-1920 Russian name for what is now called Liepāja, the third-largest city in modern-day Latvia. It is a little over 200 kilometers west/southwest of Riga.

⁵ Party man: meaning, member of the Nazi party.

⁶ Mitava was the pre-1920 Russian name for what is now called Jelgava, in modern-day Latvia. It is about 200 kilometers northeast of Liepāja/Libava, not far from Riga.

⁷ Tukkum was the pre-1920 Russian name for what is now called Tukums, in modern-day Latvia. It is about 150 kilometers northeast of Liepāja/Libava and about 60 kilometers west of Riga.

⁸ Likely a typo, and should read: Salaspils station, about 18 kilometers southeast of Riga along the Riga-Daugavpils railway.

⁹ The italicized text is an actual footnote inserted into the original text of this interview transcript.

¹⁰ Leo Blech was a prominent conductor who performed at opera houses in Aachen, Berlin, Vienna, and Prague. He fled Nazi Germany in 1937 and settled in Riga where he began to conduct the Latvian National Opera and Ballet Theater. Hermann Goering arranged for Blech to receive an exit visa to neutral Sweden where he was able to survive the war. He was the only Jew in Riga to survive due to this level of intervention.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Blech

¹¹ MOPR, an acronym for "International Organization for Assistance to Fighters for Revolution," was a subsidiary organization of the Comintern. The organization was tasked with aiding imprisoned leftist revolutionaries around the world. Colloquially, MOPR was also referred to as the International Red Aid.

¹² MTS, or "Machine Tractor Stations", were state-owned enterprises where agriculture equipment was held and maintained for use on Soviet collective farms.

¹³ The Komsomol was the major political youth organization of the Soviet Union. It is a syllabic abbreviation of The All-Union Leninist Young Communist League.

¹⁴ The Workers' Guard consisted of volunteer armed detachments which were formed at places of employment in the newly-formed Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic from July 1940 to June 1941. They guarded industrial sites, election sites, and enforced order at mass events.

¹⁵ "Sauspils" almost certainly refers to Salaspils, a town southeast of Riga that was surrounded by several Nazi-run camps, including an infamous forced labor camp and a POW camp, 350Z.

¹⁶ Bunka, a choir singer in the Riga opera and ballet theater, was apparently present during the interview with Lepin; these are his words.