

[L.1] Commission on the Compilation of a Chronicle of the Great Patriotic War

Conversations with Valentina Vasilyevna Pyzh

Conversation conducted and recorded by researcher N. K. Strelkova
Neubrandenburg¹
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1. Student of the pedagogical technical college of the city of Lida²
2. Year of birth 1924
3. Belarusian
4. Member of the VLKSM³ since 1940

I was born in 1924. Before the war I lived in Lida, where I was studying in my second year at the pedagogical technical college. On June 22nd there was an air raid in Lida; I went by foot in the direction of Minsk. On July 1, around Minsk, I got caught by the Germans in an encirclement. I was able to run away. I went in the direction of Osipovichi,⁴ where my uncle lived. I stayed to live with him. In three days, my father came with the family (he lived past Lida) and left for Bobruisk.⁵ I stayed at my uncle's. I had a nonbiological mother and so I did not want to go with my father. My uncle set me up as a bookkeeper's apprentice at a flour mill plant. The Germans began to take away all the party⁶ people, and they would shoot them. They offered going to Germany and would talk about how good it was to live there, but in 1942, when letters started to arrive from Germany, and when we found out how Russians live there, there were no longer any volunteers to go. They sent me a notice too. Then I left for my father in Bobruisk. After some time they arrested my father. He was involved with underground work - he put out leaflets and newspapers. They had arrested a comrade of my father's and hung him from a tree near his house. When my father found out about this, he ran up all anxious and said that sooner or later, such a fate awaits him too. They arrested my father. I would take parcels, but they did

1 Neubrandenburg is a small city in current-day northeastern Germany. It held two prisoner of war camps and Roma and Sinti labor camps during the war. The Red Army captured Neubrandenburg in late April 1945.

2 Lida is a city in current-day western Belarus, about 100 kilometers west of Minsk.

3 This is a syllabic abbreviation of The All-Union Leninist Young Communist League, or Komsomol.

4 Osipovichi/Asipovichy is a town, in current-day Belarus, located about 90 kilometers southeast of Minsk.

5 Bobruisk/Babruysk is a city in current-day Belarus, about 50 kilometers southeast of Osipovichi and about 150 kilometers southeast of Minsk.

6 That is, members of Soviet communist party.

not take anything and even threatened that I myself would end up in prison. One time, me and my little brother went to take a parcel and we see they have wrapped our father and others in wire and are throwing them into a car as if they were firewood. My father only had time to say: "Farewell, children. I did too little for the Motherland, you continue my work."

Past Bobruisk there was ephedra. Enormous pits were dug there and they would shoot people on the edge of these pits. They executed our father. Living in the city was very hard. Me and my little brother left for Solominka⁷ village, where we were born. Our aunt took us in - our mother's sister. My brother, born in 1926, did not want to live in the countryside and was dying to get revenge for our father, but the partisans wouldn't take him. Partisans came to our village often. One time armed people came to my aunt's house at night and started asking where we were from and who we were. At that point, my brother started asking to join the partisans, but they did not take him and told him to live in the village and provide information on German garrisons and their equipment. The partisans advised my brother to take up collecting milk, which was collected in the village. Let them think that you are a German worker, their henchman. Then it would be better and easier to be admitted to the partisan detachment. And that is what my brother did. He went to work, but he didn't like this very much. He wanted to actively fight. Not far from our village the Germans had built a sawmill, and the workers working at the mill were guarded by Germans. [L.1 reverse] One time, my brother took a basket and went into the forest. Later, he runs up and shouts to me: "Hide, the police will come soon."

The situation was thus: my brother had come up to one German guard and asked for a light. He took advantage of the fact that the German let go the rifle from his hands: "don't beat me, I have many children." My brother took the rifle and quickly into the forest. My brother and his comrade left and joined the partisans. About three days after they left, a car with a translator and Germans arrived. They put me in the car and brought me to Bobruisk, to Pushkinskaya Street 20, to the Gestapo. This was in June 1943. They began to interrogate me about where my brother was, whether the partisans were coming, and where they were located. I wouldn't confess and said that my brother was taken as a German worker. After the interrogation, they put me into a solitary room where it was impossible to sit with your legs stretched out. At the second interrogation, they asked the same things, and I answered the same way as during the first interrogation. They slapped me harder and harder on the cheeks. But then my aunt sold a pig and something else, redeemed the money for 5

⁷ Likely refers to Solomenka/Salomenka, located about 15 kilometers northwest of Bobruisk/Babruysk.

golden rubles,⁸ and gave it to the investigator. I stayed there for two more weeks and they released me.

At about 12 at night cars would come to the Gestapo and take people away. To where, we know. Oh, how scary it was. You're sitting, awaiting that it will be my turn now.

After they released me, my brother came to us often. He was in the Kirov regiment.⁹ The partisans also recommended that I collect milk, which I would take to the city. This was why I had access.¹⁰ In the city, we procured salt and everything that was needed for the partisans (clothing, shoes).

Not only in our one village did I collect milk. In Sychkovo¹¹ village, the teacher gave me reports: where which garrisons were, what equipment they had. I was also connected to doctor Gurinovich, who worked for the Germans. He would give me medicine for the partisans. Switchman Krylovskii worked for the railroad. He would pass me train schedules. As soon as it got dark, partisans would visit and I passed all the information and medicine along. My brother was with the partisans for a year and died in battle two weeks before Easter in 1944. I also wanted to join the partisans, but they wouldn't take me. They said that I would do more good in the village and that it was hard to find a trusted person. And this is what I did. In 1944, the partisans mobilized all the male youth in order to prevent the Germans from enlisting them into the people's army.¹² They were licking their chops about¹³ our village for a long time, because it was considered a partisan village. The eagle police came to find out who from the village was helping the partisans.

On May 14, 1944, they surrounded the village and started to drive everyone together into one place. Going by the evidence they had, all partisan families were called up off a list. A car drove up and they took everyone - women with small children, and men, and the elderly- to Bobruisk to the SD.¹⁴ I was called up for an interrogation and they asked again when the partisans come to us and how we help

8 Golden rubles were late tsarist-era currency resulting from the Russian Empire going on the gold standard and tying the ruble's value to gold.

9 This likely refers to the S. M. Kirov brigade, a partisan unit that formed in June 1943 and operated in various districts in central and/or western Belarus, potentially including the Lida district, where the interviewee went to technical college. <https://partizany.by/brigade/212/>; http://213sp56sd.ucoz.ru/load/partizanskoe_dvizhenie/brigada_im_s_m_kirova/43

10 Access to the city, that is.

11 Sychokvo/Sychkava is a village about 8 kilometers northwest of Bobruisk/Babruysk.

12 This may refer to the Russian National People's Army, a military unit composed of Russians fighting for Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union, though this unit ceased functioning in 1943.

13 A Russian expression, *острить зубы*, is used here, which literally means "to sharpen one's teeth."

14 That is, the *Sicherheitsdienst*, the intelligence agency of the SS, who provided officers for the security forces in occupied territories, and under whom the *Einsatzgruppen* killing squads were formally subordinated.

the partisans. I did not confess to anything. The front was getting ever closer. On Sunday a car came. They called up the elderly and the sick and took them away. On the next day at 8 o'clock in the morning, they ordered us to come out of our cells. They lined us up and took us to the Bobruisk camp.¹⁵ After that, they loaded everyone into freight wagons and brought us to Minsk, [L. 2] where they put us in a camp where they beat everyone over the head with sticks. They asked the sick to identify themselves and took them away in a "black raven".¹⁶ We would get swill. We stayed there only a week. They ordered everyone to leave their things - you will go for a walk. But in actuality, everyone was put on a transport. They put us in railcars and off we went.

It was summer, and it was unbearably hot in the railcar. They don't give water, 70-80 people in each railcar, women scream, swoon and die. A *politsai* will come and see some good boots - he'll tear them off. We arrived at the city of Auschwitz (Osventsym), and saw many trains from which they were unloading people. A German comes up to our railcar and asks: "Who here are partisan bandits?" He walked past, having threatened us with his stick. They unloaded us too. Men on one side, us on the other. The camp was split into a men's part and a women's part. When we were approaching, we saw chimneys there, and everything around was enclosed in wire. I thought that this was a factory here. Everyone's head was completely shaved. They gave us some kind of rags to put on. While they were shaving our heads, they were burning Jewish children in a bonfire. They brought our group up to this bonfire. We watched how children burned. We stood and waited our turn. The bonfire was already burning low. The Germans deliberated about something for a long time. We continued to stand in formation. Some girl in our formation dared to say a few words in Russian. That's when they put aside our incineration. They had mixed a Jewish group up with ours. They took us to the bathhouse again. The first time we washed ourselves in preparation for our incineration. The second time, we washed in order in order to live in the barracks. Again, the bathhouse all night. They call it bathhouse, but in reality this is how they wash: they put about 500-700 people in formation through a stream of cold water. The whole "steam bath" took place barefoot on a cement floor. This second time they gave slightly better clothing. In the morning, they tattooed No. 79994 on my left arm with a small needle. The rain began, it was cold and windy. We were driven outside, head shaved. They did not provide even a little kerchief. In the barracks there were fleas and bed bugs. They still hadn't given us food since the journey there. Only on the third day, they brought us

15 Bobrusik/Babruysk had a prisoner of war camp as well as a few transition camps (*Durchgangslager*) during the war. [Три лагеря смерти Бобруйска \(komkur.info\)](http://komkur.info); [Durchgangslager - Virtuelles Migrationsmuseum \(virtuelles-migrationsmuseum.org\)](http://virtuelles-migrationsmuseum.org)

16 In the context of the German occupation, locals used this name to refer to German gas vans, gas chambers on wheels.

black turnip and dried carrot, which we greedily ate. Many fell ill. Typhus appeared in our barracks, which is why they covered us in wire and wouldn't let us out. At 3 o'clock in the morning, they would make us get up, would bring black coffee and give ½ liter for 5 people, so each of us got a gulp. Then they put us in formation and you have to stand at attention. We were not allowed to touch one another. Torrential rain is falling. We stand there anyway, in our light dresses with uncovered head. An *auzerka*¹⁷ (overseer) comes at 6 o'clock and calls roll off a list. At lunch they would give ½ liter of water, beaten together with flour. At home they don't give such things to pigs. At around 4 o'clock they'll give 200 grams of bread, and from 6-8 o'clock again inspection - roll call. It was impossible to drink the water: if you drink it, your stomach bloats and your tongue hurts. Many among us died. If someone had diarrhea, they did not give them food for three days. We were told that in 1941-1942-1943 diseases raged even more in the camp, and that 2-3 people were left alive to a barracks while the rest died a hungry death or were incinerated in the crematorium. It was like this sometimes: they are driving everyone to work, a German orchestra is playing a march by the gates, and you had to walk in unison, lifting your head up high. If someone walks badly, then they would beat them with a rubber stick. Everyone worked in the field, and when we returned in the evening, then they would let through 5 groups of five. They'll leave the 6th group of five and direct them to the crematorium for incineration, or they didn't like a group of ten at inspection-roll call - they incinerate them all.

[L. 2 reverse] When we arrived, the Polish women would tell us that Stalin had told Hitler that if he continues to treat the people in this way, we will destroy Germany. And indeed, they stopped burning Russians and Poles, and burned only Jews and Roma.

It sometimes happened that they would drive a huge number of echelons here. Music plays by the crematorium, live fire or puffs of black smoke day and night from the chimneys, and there is a very bad smell. 8 crematoria were working at the same time.

After quarantine they started to drive us to work. I tried to always go to work, no matter how bad I was feeling, because being in the camp was even worse - such a stink from the incineration of live people, that you don't know what to do with yourself. In the field there was at least fresh air. You'd go to work, and the men would say that the front is drawing nearer. Warsaw has been taken, don't stay at the camp: it's mined. Those who tried to run away, they hung them in front of everyone. At the end of 1944, they began to take people out of the camp. We also noticed that earlier they incinerated only Jewish elderly and children, and now they began to burn work-capable Jews. In the morning they put them on transport, give them a little

¹⁷ *Auzerka*: derived from the German *Aufseherin*, a term that Russian speaking survivors often used to refer to female overseers in a Nazi camp.

piece of bread each, and take them to the forest, where there was another crematorium.

They also incinerated the entire Gypsy camp. There were more than 82 thousand women in the camp and more than 120 thousand men.

Form of attire - a cross on the front and back of the dress, on the left arm a little cloth with the letter R (meaning Russian) and a number.

Sometime later they gave us striped dresses, ran us through cold water, and sent us off to a different camp, Ravensbrück, because the front was getting close to Osventsym. They brought us to Ravensbrück. I see a black wall 4-5 meters in height in a depression, a pit. The wall has electric wire, and beyond the wall are barracks. Not a single barracks was free there upon our arrival - people were brought here from different Polish cities. They fit 1500-2000 people each in a barracks-block, but they did not house us for two days: there was nowhere to put us. On the second day they gave us some green soup. Hungry people pounce on it. They spill some, so some lick it up from the ground. A horrid scene. I stayed in this camp an entire month, and then they sent me to camp Eberswalde¹⁸ - a subcamp of camp Ravensbrück. It is also located in a depression with electro-wire along the wall. This is a small camp. It was on the outskirts of a military city, where they would drive us to work at a factory in which shells were made. The least the shells weighed was 8 kg each, but also 15-16 and we had to lift all of this. And they fed us swill too. They'll bring it at 12 o'clock during the day, we'll drink this black liquid, and back to work again. They gave us neither spoons nor knives. After work, we would stand for another two hours at roll call. Very many would fall ill with tuberculosis, scurvy, heart ailments. Those who fell ill, they were all sent to the infirmary, from where they would send them to Ravensbrück to the crematorium. I worked there for 6 months. There would be times when we would gather. Sometimes we would cry, and sometimes we would sing. We procured newspapers - we would steal them from the foremen. We learned that our troops took Stettin. This is 90 km from the camp. Well, we think, they will get liberate us in about two days. They stopped driving us to the factory. Instead they drove us to dig trenches and anti-tank ditches. But as for bread, they started to give 100 grams each. In April [L. 3], all the overseers started moving, getting ready. They ordered "Russians move off to the side." They took everyone else away, leaving us at the camp. They gave us each half a loaf of bread and a little piece of margarine. For three days they didn't give us anything else to eat, and on the 4th day they drove us from the camp. We are walking along the road, and civilian Germans are running, hurrying our overseers. Everyone had grown so weak, that some were falling along the way. They drove everyone who was alive to Ravensbrück, where they gave 3 kg

18 Ravensbrück had over 40 subcamps. One of them was located in Eberswalde, a town about 50 kilometers northeast of Berlin. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eberswalde>; [Ravensbrück | Holocaust Encyclopedia \(ushmm.org\)](#)

American Red Cross packages, which contained butter, chocolate, and cookies. There was no bread. Many would eat everything up and die. On the next day, they brought everyone out of the camp, and we hear how the whole camp is being blown up, along with everyone who was there - children and the sick.

Later they stopped watching us closely, but we were afraid to take flight - German soldiers were killing people on the road. They chased us night and day, to Malchow.¹⁹

We were liberated on May 2, 1945. We did not even hear a single shot. We look - our fighters are arriving in cars and on motorcycles. We hugged them, kissed them, and cried from happiness. The Red Army men told us to dress accordingly and provided us with food. Now you peel a potato and think, I don't want to eat it raw. Oh, how difficult it is to starve. I used to think: better to die sooner, than to suffer for a long time.

¹⁹ Malchow is a small town about 70 kilometers northwest of Ravensbrück. It held a subcamp of Ravensbrück.