

Case No. 7

Stenogram of conversation

with comrade E.V. Spiridonova

2 pages

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

Stenogram of the conversation with the head of the educational section of Russian¹ Seven-year school² Number 5 in the city of Brest, Elena Benediktovna Spiridonova

Conversation conducted by researcher comrade Yelovtsan.

A.I. Shamshina records.

December 20, 1944

City of Brest.

Year of birth 1898. Belorussian. Non-party. Higher education. Pedagogue.

I was born in Brest. I went to school at the Brest gymnasium until 1914. In 1915 I left here and was in Russia and Ukraine until 1940. I finished the gymnasium in Tula in 1918 and moved to Chernigov region. At first I worked there in offices as a secretary, typist, and bookkeeper. In Ukraine in 1927 I started teaching. I studied at the Poltava teachers pedagogical institute. At the beginning of 1940 I asked to be sent here because my parents were here. Taught here.

I lived in Grayevka.³ On Sunday, I wake up my husband. He asks:

-Training?

I say:

-No, it's very real war.

After a few hours there's yelling that the Germans are already here.

At first, we were really worried and feared everything. We had constant arrests of easterners.⁴ They would take them, put them in ranks, and drive them away in automobiles. We didn't go outside for weeks at a time.

¹ Meaning that all instruction at this school was in the Russian language. Other schools, particularly in the non-Russian regions and republics, often offered education in other languages.

² Seven-year schools were schools of partial secondary education in the 1920s-1950s Soviet Union.

³ A neighborhood in the north of Brest.

⁴ "Easterners" refers to inhabitants of what had been the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) from 1921 to 1939, when Brest and what would become the western half of the BSSR were part of the Second Polish Republic. In September 1939, soon after and in coordination with the German invasion of western Poland, the Soviet Union annexed parts of what had been eastern Poland, including Brest, into the BSSR as well as the Ukrainian SSR.

My teacher acquaintances knew that I know the Ukrainian language well and offered me work. At first, I worked as a laborer at a vegetable garden, weeding cucumbers, potatoes, and beets. In the fall of 1942, I went to teach at a Ukrainian school. I was the math teacher for the fifth and sixth grades. The Germans had no interest whatsoever in the school activities and didn't go inside at all. In the event that a German shows up at the school, he doesn't even look at the students, but at windows and doors. If it's a comfortable premises, then everybody must get out in one-two hours, because the Germans have taken a liking to the building. We switched buildings about five times in the course of the winter. We work for a few weeks, or a month, and move again to another place. So that's how the schooling was.

The director was Ukrainian. Some taught better than others. We taught in both Ukrainian and Russian languages. For one period, I taught in Ukrainian and in Russian. There were Ukrainian as well as Russian children. Poles did not go to our school.

[L. 1 reverse]

In Brest there were Russians, Ukrainians, and Poles, but only this school was Ukrainian, and it was a higher-preparatory school. It only had three grades, fifth, sixth, and seventh. The only school like this in the whole city. There were no textbooks of any kind, we taught using notes. They didn't let us study the German language. That could only be done on the private level, with separate fees. That's how arithmetic and the native language were taught, and also "science of the native land" – that's history and geography. The director told the whole history of Ukraine, but they didn't hear about geography at all. I, honestly, hadn't been to his classes, but the children said that they are only learning the history of Ukraine. They had a vague conception of the map.

The school was run by the German magistracy, where the school department was. It was headed by one of the locals. He was the inspector, and the regional-level inspector was a Ukrainian. There was also some kind of school inspector and a German. They didn't get involved – upper classes, lower, 50 people per teacher - so long as there was not a lot of paperwork.

We always laughed that we earned enough for two cucumbers a day. We couldn't buy anything more. And I got 600 rubles. They gave us 5 kilograms of bread for a month, and later we would receive 3 kilograms. But such bread, that it was impossible to eat it. We lived very badly, bartering and selling everything.

My husband is now the senior inspector for social insurance, but under the Germans he was a laborer in military logistics.

The Germans carried out all kinds of outrages here. At first, they beat people up on the street. Arrests, shootings. They established a ghetto here. It housed several thousand Jews. They were killing them all, in the ghetto and somewhere they took

them away to. Toward the end they did sudden roundups at the bazaar. People were packed into automobiles and taken away, not to be seen again.

At first, we had one gathering and even that was for village teachers. I did not participate at all, and personally was not at any of the gatherings. I know that neighborhood meetings were scheduled. The Germans were not interested in schools. Portraits of Hitler were hanging in schools. There were people here who tried to do everything to please them.

At first the mood was very pleasant for the Germans. People were very happy - our saviors have come. That's actually how the entire populace related to them, but after, when they saw how bad their treatment was, everybody was against them. Toward the end, the mood was very bad, everyone feared for their survival. When a night had passed you could thank god. They would show up at 2-3 at night, take you away and that's it, you were gone.

In May 1944 our school year ended and we did not go back to work. They drove us to the vegetable gardens. We and our students went to pull weeds every week. They assigned us to the park⁵ and we pulled weeds there. The school did not have a set building. We were on Dolgaya, Topolevaya, Belosotskaya Streets. Not only our school, but all of them. There were a lot of Russian schools. Then they sorted them into three or four buildings, not allowing us to work properly.

[L.2]

We worked for a very short time. If they don't know about the existence of the building, we work, but the second they find out, they throw us out immediately.

Under the Soviets there was a lot of school property. [The Germans] destroyed all of this and did not acquire anything new. We had a fantastic physics laboratory, a lot of scientific implements for natural science, many books, a school library. We've just left, they smash our door. They go to the cabinets and take everything good, nothing remains. We did not have textbooks. I used old textbooks, Soviet ones. I was afraid that they would take me for that any day now, but there was nothing else. The guys would get notebooks, they would buy them. This school was the only one, the others had the first four grades. They thought no other education was needed at all. Later, though, there was some kind of private Polish technical trade school. You had to pay some kind of sum there.

Maybe some kinds of lectures took place in the city, but I didn't go. I didn't even go to the movies, nor to the theater. I had a goat that I grazed in my free time. It saved me. People went, talked, broadcast on the radio, but I heard very little about this.

⁵ Given the locations of the streets the interviewee names below, this "park" may have been the old center of Brest, going by many names historically, but currently and in the brief Soviet 1939-1941 period called Freedom Square, and in the time of the German occupation renamed to Marschallplatz.

We finished school in May and the reds came on July 28. I worked until summer break.

On the final days before the arrival of the reds we had to run from the city, because we were afraid that we would be taken and be put behind bars somewhere. They did roundups in the summer. They surrounded Moskovskaya Street⁶ completely unexpectedly and took people, who had nothing with them. That was just before some holiday. People had been baking something and all of this was left in the ovens, everything left as it was. They took them and put many of them behind bars. People were afraid. We left everything behind, I didn't take anything. We hid 9 kilometers from the city.

Everybody knew perfectly well about the coming arrival of the reds, but were afraid that they wouldn't make it and that the Germans would kill them. Some even hid in barrels. Everyone wanted to remain here. On the radio they broadcast to voluntarily leave beyond the Bug.⁷ Instead of that they started to send the population away and people hid how they could. Some went far away, some nearby, wherever they knew people, they ran away to. In the villages, there were those who had just run from the cities. They came right away, cleaned them out, taking away everything. There was total pilferage here before the arrival of the Soviets. We had nothing left. Even the flowerpots were taken from my apartment. They smashed everything, stole everything.

We awaited the reds with anticipation. Me and my sister are walking down the road from the village, and the locals yell:

-Where are you going, the Germans are still there.

The bridge was already blown up. We had to walk with the water above our knees across the little river Desna.⁸ We arrived and saw Red Army soldiers. We approach, greet them, and ask whether we can keep going. They say – yes, you may.

Life was very expensive. Towards the end it was very expensive. Lard cost 1500 rubles a kilogram, 1200-1300 for a kilogram of butter, and a bread loaf ran from 150 up to 300 rubles. A liter of milk cost 150 rubles, 130 rubles. Dreadful high prices. It was very bad towards the end. Around the very end we couldn't buy anything.

[L. 2 reverse]

At the beginning they treated the easterners particularly badly. They constantly intimidated them. They wanted to establish a ghetto for the easterners too, but very many started to run away and become partisans. That probably had an effect and they did not establish it. They treated the Poles best of all. Poles occupied all the

⁶ A major street running a long way through eastern Brest on a west-east axis.

⁷ The Bug river is directly west/southwest of Brest. Today it marks the Belarusian-Polish border.

⁸ This refers to a small river in the area around Brest. The well-known Desna river flows through southwest Russia and northern Ukraine, nowhere near Brest.

most important positions. The Poles treated the easterners very badly. Easterners were not allowed stay in lines at stores: as soon as easterners appeared they would be attacked. When you're standing waiting for that miserable bread, you hear just about everything.

My son is at the front, he's 23 years old. He was in Kiev. Just before the war we got him into the Kiev military-feldsher school. The last time I saw him was in May 1940 and after that I only saw him recently. He has been at the frontline the whole time. Now he is already a senior lieutenant. We didn't know where he was or anything, and he didn't know where we were. He wrote to the old address to people we knew and relatives.

Aside from work at the school I did day labor. My husband earned some paltry 300 rubles, with these high prices. I always said that for us it wasn't so bad, those with children experienced true misery. Towards the end, before their departure, they sent away hundreds of families. They did this for a whole week and then a whole echelon appeared in Brest again. They took them somewhere toward Siedlce⁹ and further. They didn't find a place for them anywhere and brought them back. One woman with four children came out to the bazaar and begged, saying her children were dying of hunger. Everyone started throwing them money.

Now life is getting back to normal. Military units help us – parents of our students are among them. They help us transport firewood. One time they brought us six meters of firewood. Now we have a few drays. It's not great with textbooks. We have to rely on our notes for some subjects. There are teachers who were sent here, easterners. We have breakfasts for the children. They give cookies, bread. We each receive 500 grams of bread. At first there was a cafeteria but now there isn't one, temporarily. Now they started giving us ration cards – to the deputy director and the director. The teachers don't receive this. They say that we'll receive them starting New Year's.

We opened the school on September 1 and all the first four grades were in our school. We give the children 100-150 grams of bread each. We set up a pioneers' room.¹⁰ There is a library. We were able to save part of the books in time. Later they sent new ones. They send textbooks. We got notebooks. We got textbooks two times, though its not a large quantity in terms of allotment for each school. We are one hundred percent supplied with textbooks for some subjects. When it comes to history and geography textbooks, it's bad.

⁹ A small city a little over 100 kilometers almost directly west of Brest, in current-day Poland.

¹⁰ The pioneers, officially the Vladimir Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization, were Soviet mass organization for children.