

[1.1] Commission for Compiling the Chronicle of the Great Patriotic War

Conversation with Maria Alexandrovna Vinokurova

The conversation is conducted and transcribed by the researcher N. K. Strelkova

Neubrandenburg, June 1945

Maria Vinokurova was born in 1923. Russian.

Before the war she worked as a receptionist at wool mill № 14, Moscow.

Member of the Komsomol since 1938.

Education – 10 classes of school for adults.

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Before the war, I worked in Moscow at wool mill № 14. When the war began, I submitted an application to join the army. I was assigned to the 22nd Infantry Division as a nurse. The entire time we were stationed near Viazma. When the Germans attacked in 1941, we were surrounded. There were about 150 of us, people wanted to organize a partisan detachment, but failed. We ended up in a camp in Viazma. The food was poor, only 100 grams of bread. There were so many people in this camp that they stood in crowds outdoors, all the barracks were occupied, and it was impossible to get to them. The guards sprayed these crowds of people with gunfire, they would let off one or two bursts, shoot people randomly. Together with two lieutenants, I escaped from the camp. I went to Briansk where my aunt lived. I walked 280 kilometers, but the Germans were already there.

One dispossessed kulak, who became a village elder under the Germans, was very angry with my cousin, who had carried out the dekulakization. This kulak claimed that my cousin was a partisan. My cousin was taken away and shot. All of my aunt's property was ransacked. Then this village elder went after me. He denounced me as a partisan, and I was at once sent to Germany. I ended up in Berlin, where I worked as a servant for a manufacturer by the name of Hilgner. Hilgner lived in opulence: he had his own factory and restaurant.¹ I got up at 5 a.m. and went to bed at midnight. I did the laundry and cleaned. I met Russian emigrées. Once, my friend and I were standing at a bus stop and speaking Russian. A very good-looking old woman was standing nearby, she turned out to be an emigrée. We made acquaintances. She started giving me Russian books to read. I read them at night or when the owners of the house were gone.

Hilgner started following me. One splendid day, I was woken up and told to get dressed. A policeman took me to Alexanderplatz,² where the Gestapo was located.

At the Gestapo office, they asked if I knew any Russians. I said I did. They started interrogating me as to whether I was a member of their underground organization, about which I definitely knew nothing. They slapped me in the face and tore all the buttons off of my coat. Then they let me go. I sat down to write a postcard to my friend for her

to come by, and also wrote, "I was at the Gestapo office, the bastards beat me. My chest is apparently broken. But it's ok, our boys will come and take revenge." [1.2] I ran to mail this postcard, but the owner of the house rushed after me and didn't let me go. I handed it to a passer-by with the request that he mail it. The postcard fell into the hands of the Gestapo, and the next day, I was at the Gestapo office again. "Is the postcard yours?" they asked. I answered that it was mine. They started to interrogate me. "Who are the bastards, who are your boys?" This time, they beat me even more severely, and the interpreter smashed a pencil on my forehead. He said that I would never see the light of day again.

The next day, they sent me to a prison. From then on, they summoned me to the Gestapo office every week and kept beating and beating me. Once, they took me into a room where everything was electrified, they sat me on an electric chair and ran a current through me. Then they put me in another room, where I stayed for about 40 minutes. The heat there was absolutely intolerable. After such "procedures," I lost my mind, I was raving mad. I stayed in the hospital for 5 months. Upon recovery, I was sent to the prison again and for interrogation yet again. This time, they threw me into a room where in one corner there's this machine, which grabs me with iron hands and tears my dress, puts me on a bench and straps me in, and then hits me with a rubber-tipped lash. They gave me five lashes. I apparently fainted because I woke up in the hospital, where I stayed for five weeks.

My hands, my head, my whole body were shaking with nervous tremors. From the hospital, they again sent me to prison. I was summoned another three times.

Once, during the summer, there was a very heavy bombing of Berlin. The guards fled, several prisoners ran away, but they caught me and put me in a separate cell again. I spent 8.5 months in prison, but they didn't get anything from me and sent me to the Braunschweig penal camp.³

There we got up at 4 a.m., till 4.30 we had to get dressed, wash our faces, make our beds. The overseer checked every bed, and if she didn't like it, she beat you up until you started bleeding. At 5 a.m. followed the roll-call. We had to remain standing for 2 hours. They read our numbers in German. If somebody failed to respond to their number, they beat this person so badly that she bled from the mouth. I had the number 22256. After the roll-call, they sent us to work. We picked peas. They gave us the task of collecting so-many kilograms of peas in so-many hours. If you didn't bring the required amount, you'd be beaten. All our belongings were taken away from us, they gave us just some overalls no matter the season. For lunch, we had a liter of gritty soup, and if anyone wanted another portion, they gave one lash for lunch, two lashes for two lunches.

I was in that camp for only one week, before they sent me to Ravensbrück, the women's camp, where everyone beat the prisoners. The block leader forced me to take off my shoe, and she used it to hit my head. One block leader took such a shine to me that she beat me every day just for pleasure. I was in the camp for 10 days, and for 10 days, she beat me. Then I was sent to the camp in Neubrandenburg. I worked at an

aircraft factory. They put me to work on a lathe, I made aircraft parts. The work was very demanding and difficult. I worked for two weeks and made 30 defective parts. They put me in a punishment cell (bunker), I stood knee-deep in water for five days on end and received a small piece of bread only twice. After the punishment cell, I was assigned to bore wings. If the overseer saw that you were not working well, she would hit you on the head.

For the whole year, I had abscesses all over my body, but no one gave me rest from work. Once, after a flu, my legs gave out, but I preferred not to go to the hospital. Doctor Valentina Fedorovna, who was also a prisoner, helped me. She healed me slowly, but I was up and about. [l.3] In the hospital, they did not treat people, but just tormented them, prescribed lethal injections or sent them with a red book to the crematorium⁴. I worked without sick-leave, other girls would bring me to the factory, they would put me somewhere in a corner so that the overseer could not see me. My legs recovered, but then I had a sore throat, I could neither eat nor drink. I was walking around and working with a temperature of 38-39°.

In April, the overseer said that it was necessary to evacuate in order not to fall into the hands of Russian bandits. They drove everyone out of the camp. As they wouldn't feed us, we ate raw beets. We moved 30 kilometers away from the city, and then there was this bang. The overseers scattered, and the three of us ran away. We came to a village where all the inhabitants had left. We changed into new clothes, we even took some more clothes. On May 1, our boys arrived. Now I'm finally free, after 3 years of forced labor. [l.4]

¹ For a postcard view (from the 1920s) of the Gasthaus Bürgerpark Paul Hilgner, see:

<https://www.ansichtskarten-center.de/pankow/1100-pankow-gasthaus-buergerpark-paul-hilgner>

In 1934 Hilgner also bought Seebad Mariendorf through "Aryanization." A party member, he died March 1, 1947. <https://de-academic.com/dic.nsf/dewiki/1268549>; https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seebad_Mariendorf

² Berlin's Police Presidium, which contained the offices of the local Gestapo office, is meant.

³ This may be the labor correctional camp in Hallendorf, called a "penal camp" (Straflager) and located 15 km from Braunschweig.

⁴ *"Unmöglich, diesen Schrecken aufzuhalten". Die medizinische Versorgung durch Häftlinge im Frauen-KZ Ravensbrück*, ed. Saavedra Santis and Ramona Wickert (Berlin, 2017)