

Translation: Christopher Tauchen

Transcript of interview with a Soviet survivor of the German occupation regime in the Soviet Union, conducted by the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War

February 17, 1945

Olga Fyodorovna Sukhostat — lives in the village of Dikanka. Forced into slavery by the Germans in early 1943. Returned to Dikanka after her emancipation.

I was born in Dikanka in 1927. I went to school through the fifth grade, and then I worked at the communal farm. I worked with my mother, who was in charge of the orchard there. We had a good life. There was plenty of milk and bacon.

When they took me to Germany my mother was so heartbroken, she completely lost it. I didn't think she could handle it. It was March 1943 when they took me. I didn't go until the third time they called, when they said they were going to take my mother too. They loaded us in freight cars. They took us to Kiev, and from there to Poland and Germany.

The bosses came to choose who they wanted.

In every city they had us disinfected. Policemen and German soldiers guarded us. They treated us harshly, always shouting at us and hitting us. We were always under guard: the Germans even came with us into the bathhouses. We had to take off our clothes and wash ourselves in front of them. They'd smear lime on our heads, and some other toxic stuff that would eat away at your eyes if it got in. We were treated like dogs. They were always hitting us with sticks. One time I was beaten with a stick and a whip just for looking back to find my friend. The whip gets you right back in line.

The first German town we came to was Stargard¹. There was another bathhouse there. It was a Saturday when we got to Germany. We'd spent a week in a camp at Stolp². On the Sunday they lined us up outside the train station, where the bosses came to choose who they wanted. One of them would come, grab a girl he liked, pay next to nothing, and take her home. They paid twenty rubles upfront, after which it was three rubles a month. This boss chose me, too. I went with him. We boarded a train and traveled to his home. His wife brought me some water. I bathed and changed into some clothes I had with me from home. They gave us nothing more than turnip juice and 300 grams of bread, or so they said. It was less than that, just a small piece.

They wouldn't look you in the eye, as if you weren't human.

¹ Stargard: city in Pomerania.

² Stolp (today: Słupsk): city in Pomerania.

Once I'd bathed and changed my clothes, the boss took me to the shed to show me the animals. He showed me how many pigs he had, how many sheep. He had five cows, eleven pigs, four sheep, and two horses, in addition to the chickens and geese. The boss was fifty-three, his wife was 48, and they had two children, ages eight and thirteen. I was the only one who looked after the animals. The boss helped a little bit, and the wife just took care of the house. She had nothing to do with the animals and she didn't work in the field.

Because I worked with my mother in the orchard I never learned how to handle livestock. I didn't know how to milk. The wife was getting angry at her husband for choosing me. I'd been brought here to milk, but I didn't know how. She'd scream, "You Russian devil!". The boss was angry until I learned to milk. It was very hard work. I was up at six to clean out the shed, to clean up after the pigs, cows, and other animals. I'd milk the cows and groom the horses. They got mad at me if I didn't do a good job. The boss got to keep only one liter from the five cows. The rest was sent out.

I'd get some potatoes, black coffee, and a small slice of bread. Then I'd work in the fields until 11 p.m. I'd rush in from the fields, milk the cows, tend to the animals, get them fed. Then the wife would have me spin wool until 12 or 1 a.m. She wouldn't let me go to bed any earlier, and you couldn't go to bed without her permission.

I got sick twice. I lay there like a dog. I wasn't allowed to go to town or to another village. The girls who worked in that village, we got together once a week. We always talked about Ukraine and felt sad. I spent two years like that.

I had a winter coat and a light coat. I'd worn through all my clothes, and in that whole time the wife gave me only one old dress and some old shoes. We wore wooden clogs that hurt so badly you could barely walk. Running away was impossible. There were guards all around. Some of our Russian boys ran off, but they were caught, beaten up, and thrown in jail. The other Germans in the village and the young people treated us very badly. They wouldn't look you in the eye, as if you weren't human. There were times they'd beat us until we were down on the ground.

A lot of our girls were in that village with other bosses. We'd talk when we got together. Everyone had the same story: the bosses hit them. During the week we weren't allowed to speak to one another.

In the fall of 1943 we were taken to the work on the trenches. That was in Pollnow, East Prussia. We dug fortifications there, then in Schneidemühl³. The conditions were even worse there. The barracks were dug into the ground. It was cold and damp. We worked on the trenches for three months starting in the fall of 1944. All we got to eat was a loaf of bread every three days. Just a small loaf, soup once a day, some water. We were starving.

Later we were transferred to Bromberg⁴, Poland, where it got much worse. We were in dugouts, sleeping on straw. Another two weeks of that and we'd have starved to

³ Schneidemühl (today: Piła), city in Western Prussia.

⁴ Bromberg (today Bydgoszcz), city in Pomerania.

death, we were so hungry. We worked from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m., or until dark. Then we'd walk the six kilometers to our dugouts, and the same distance back again. The Poles who'd gone over to the Germans, they really beat us badly. You stop for a second, and those collaborators were at you with the whip. One time I was hit so hard I almost collapsed. They'd yell in Polish: "Keep moving! Work!"

Then we could see our Russian boys moving freely toward us.

Then we could see our Russian boys moving freely toward us. All the Germans and Poles were running away. First they'd told us to go back to the barracks. Anyone who wanted could go to Berlin; everyone else would have to fend for themselves. But we left the barracks, which had caught fire. The boys told us that the front line was 20 kilometers away. We set out for the village to meet up with the Russians. There were still some Germans in the village. They told us to blow up the factories, but we didn't.

The Red Army reached the village on January 21, 1945. We were sent further back to the rear. The soldiers fed us and sent us by truck to Warsaw, where we took a train over the border. They said it was too dangerous for us there at the front. The first we saw of them was around noon on January 21. The tanks arrived (this was the village we went to after the barracks). We ran out to meet them. They kept asking us who we were, where we were from, and so on. We got fed — they gave us tomatoes, apples, canned food, bread. They were so kind to us, giving us those things. We reminded them of their own loved ones. All of them had brothers or sisters who'd been taken to Germany. One of the girls was reunited with her father, who was part of a tank crew. She broke down in tears and told him everything. He set off for the front, and she kept going with us. I didn't know anything about my own family. I'd gotten four letters all at once, and then I heard nothing for a year and a half. After that we weren't allowed to write. We lost that privilege in June 1943.

The lieutenant told us: "Take anything you need, girls! Get yourselves some new clothes!"

After Warsaw we were taken to Brest. Everyone who had been liberated from German lands was sent to the camps there. We were questioned and checked out. They issued temporary papers to those who needed them. The soldiers gave us lots of sugar, cereals, canned food. They were very good to us. Then this senior lieutenant had us come with him. Other officers went to other groups of girls. The lieutenant took us to the city. He went up to a store, smashed out the window and told us to go inside: "Take anything you need, girls! Get yourselves some new clothes!" So we all got new clothes and took what we needed. I got three dresses, new shoes, and some stockings. Girls who needed a coat took one, along with whatever else they needed. Our soldiers got us properly fed and clothed and sent us on.

When I left for Germany I looked young: plump, with color in my cheeks. But now my mother and sister said: “Olya, how you’ve aged!”

After Brest we stopped in Kovel, where they checked and stamped our papers. Then we went to Kiev. We spent days waiting for our train. Eventually we made it to Poltava. My mother was there visiting my sister. It was 7 a.m. I went into the apartment, but no one knew who I was. I said, “I that you, Mama?” She didn’t recognize me. When it dawned on her she and my sister ran over to me, crying. They’d long since given up hope of seeing me alive. They bathed me, fed me, and put me to bed. My niece — my sister’s girl — came to me. They said that her aunt Olya was there. She said, “Which one?” My mother was a mess, she just couldn’t stop crying. When I left for Germany I looked young: plump, with color in my cheeks. But now my mother and sister said: “Olya, how you’ve aged!” My sister is twenty-six, but I’m the one who looks older. When I’m done recovering I’m going to go stay with my sister in Poltava.

On the road back from Germany I kept dreaming about being there. I was still afraid of the bosses. I don’t have those dreams anymore. Our entire village was burned down. Our house burned down along with everything in it. We’ve got nothing now. But so what? I’m just glad to be home.

In Germany they had us wear these badges (the badge is attached). Anyone caught without one would be beaten or could even be killed.

Address: Olga Sukhostat, c/o Aleksandra Ivanovna Vasilchenko, Kuliki Street, Velikie Budeshchi, Dikankovsk Region