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Commission for Compiling the Chronicle of the Great Patriotic War

Odessa, June 20, 1944.

Stenogram of an interview with Com. O.P. Ivanova, Com. M.I. Ptchelintseva, and Com. F.A. Brodskaya.

The interview was conducted by Com. Chermenskii, commission research associate.

Recorded by Rosliakova.

Olga Petrovna Ivanova – head of the cataloging department. Non-party member. Born in 1898. Russian. Address: 12 Chicherin Street, Apt. 11.

Maria Nikolaevna Ptchelintseva – head of the bibliography department. Born in 1902. Russian. Non-party member. Address: 4 Zhukovskaia Street, Apt. 7.

Fanni Abramova Brodskaya – librarian of the circulation desk. Jew. Non-party member. Address: 13 Pasteur Street.

Ptchelintseva. – We were able to evacuate especially valuable blackletter books and miniatures, of which we had a whole collection. We managed to take care of them very well. These books were selected by experts, and they were evacuated along with documents and materials on the history of the communist party. Once again, over the last few days, we sorted out the most valuable books, but we did it in a hurry. We grabbed what we could. We decided to send them to Tashkent. Why Tashkent? Because a relative of my husband worked as director of the Tashkent library. For some reason, the books first showed up in Penza. We got a letter from the staff in Penza who attended to the books, and then they sent them to Tashkent.

Occupation forces entered Odessa on October 16. On October 18, registration of the Jews was announced. Jews were rounded up in their boroughs, in their courtyards, and sent to the prison to be registered. To tell the truth, they didn't manage to cover all of the buildings.

On the 25th or 26th, I went to the library and came across gallows scattered throughout the city.

On October 24, a considerable explosion took place at the NKVD¹ building that was on Engels Street. They say that up to a thousand Romanian and German soldiers and officers were in the building. The next day, an order was issued in Odessa saying that Odessites wouldn't get away with this: A hundred people would be killed for every [dead] soldier, Romanian or German. From that day on, horrors began occurring throughout Odessa as retribution for the explosion at the NKVD building.

On the 25th or 26th, I went to the library and came across gallows scattered throughout the city. That made a tremendous impression on all of us. I saw two gallows with six people hanging from each. It was impossible to turn away. Hostages were being hanged as revenge for the explosion, and a lot of them were Jews and communists.

The next day, I was walking along Pushkinskaia Street. There, on every corner, was a corpse laid out expressly as a means of admonishing the population. A woman in an elegant blue suit was lying on the corner of Bebel Street. Her head was gone. A stream of blood ran across the entire sidewalk onto the roadway. Beside each corpse, as a rule, stood a board on a stake with wording as to who it was and why they were killed. To tell the truth, I didn't have the strength to read those inscriptions. My husband was a Jew. Can you imagine how worried I was?

My husband was also taken on the 18th. About two weeks later, they let the Jews go home, but they didn't let him go. He disappeared altogether. To this day, I don't know where he is. Also hanging somewhere.

A relative of my husband's, an old woman, was living with me in my apartment. She was considerably ill. Therefore, she refused to go to register. The groundskeeper had been given strict orders that not a single Jew was to remain in the building. He went to see the old woman, and she told him that she couldn't go register. They dragged her out into the courtyard. It was about eight o'clock, and it was already beginning to get dark. My windows looked out onto the street. Night came. Patrols were making the rounds in the street. She was lying beneath the windows of my room. A patrol stopped beside her and began talking to her about something. I was standing behind closed shutters. There was an order for all windows to be shuttered. In short, I heard a shot. When I went out in the morning, I saw that half of her head had been blown off. Her corpse lay beneath my windows for two days. Then, we dug a hole in the bomb shelter and buried her there.

Romanians are known to steal and take bribes.

I have to say that in the early days there were a lot of suicides among the Jews. You had to have very strong nerves to walk around the city and look around, take in the situation. Maybe there were those who enjoyed it.

There were a lot of raids. Romanian soldiers searched apartments with or without orders. During these raids, there was massive theft. Romanians are known to steal and

¹ People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, precursor to the KGB

take bribes, although they hated being mistaken for gypsies. Gypsies were well-known thieves. The Romanians were no different from gypsies in that respect.

When it was necessary to register for passports, they asked me about my husband. I said that I had been married to a Jew, but my husband was taken away, and I didn't know where he was. Now a story involving me began to unfold. I was summoned to the chief of police, with whom I had a very long conversation. He needled me over the course of an entire hour: "How could I? How dare I? Where did I find the nerve to marry a Jew?" It ended with him saying: "Bring me your parents' documents." It was necessary to prove my parents' origins. It ended more or less favorably. After two hours of talking, they registered my passport and let me go.

They drove us out of Odessa to Sortirochnaya, like cattle.

Brodskaya. – They drove us out of Odessa to Sortirochnaya², like cattle. This was in January 1942. We were in prison until it started snowing. Then they let us out. There was an order to register. We showed up in January 1942. They told us, "Take the rooms that are vacant." There was a school there. We lived in that school. After some time, they started taking us in groups and sending us away in stages. We ended up in the second-to-last group. They drove us out for sorting. Along the way, the Romanians beat us. We reached Berezovka³ at 12 o'clock at night. If somebody was openly holding something, it was taken away from them. They took away our shoes, outer garments and beat us insufferably with the butts of their rifles. They struck our heads and legs. From Berezovka, we went on foot to Domanevka.⁴ The frost was horrible. We were starving, ragged. There was nowhere to take shelter for the night, there weren't any kind of structures. I was with my ten-month-old baby. Along the way, they used rifle butts to finish off those who lagged behind. Without hesitation, they took off their clothes, undressed them.

Every day, 20-30 corpses were taken away.

That's how we reached Domanevka. In Domanevka, they led us to large accommodations. That's where typhus broke out. They wouldn't give us anything to eat. Every day, 20-30 corpses were taken away. My baby died of typhus there. They started taking us for work.

By the way, in Berezovka and Domanevka, the guards were Russian policemen. When you had to go to the lavatory, a policeman, if he felt like it, would let you go, and if he didn't feel like it, he wouldn't let you through. One day, a policeman got angry with my sister when she went to the lavatory.

² Sortirochnaya: railroad station near Odessa.

³ Ukr. Berezivka, over 90 km NNE of Odessa by today's main roads.

⁴ "Dumenovka" in the stenogram. Domanëvka (Ukr. Domanivka) is located 50 km N of Berezovka.

“Why did you leave?”

She said, “I went to the lavatory.”

“Who gave you permission?” – he grabbed his rifle.

My sister ducked. He fired. At that moment, Dr. Bronstein was coming out of the lavatory. The bullet hit him. He fell. They instantly walked over [to his body] and stripped him.

They sent us to the village Malino, where there was a state farm. We worked there for six months. We lived in a camp. They didn’t feed us. My father died of starvation there. When the work was finished, the Romanian director called us over and said, “You did a good job. I’ll send you to another collective farm.” We were horribly afraid of the concentration camp in Akmachetka.⁵ We knew that there was a death camp there. If you ended up there, you wouldn’t leave. In the morning, they put us on carts and sent us off. Where to? We didn’t know. They took us to the concentration camp in Akmachetka.

I spent a year and a half in that camp. The regimen there was horrible. The police wouldn’t give us permission to get a cup of water. You could go for water in a group of ten people. If there was an eleventh, [the police] would open fire instantly.

We lived in a fenced-in area. The building lacked a roof, lacked windows. It was cold. There were these two bricks in the barracks. We were given twenty grams of corn flour, and we baked it entirely on these bricks. My sister received 25 blows for a piece of kindling to heat the water.

We were freed on March 25 when the Red Army arrived.⁶ The policemen who had been guarding us were arrested by the NKVD. We were, of course, lice-ridden and dirty. The bodies of the dead were not buried. There was a well that they threw the bodies down and threw stones on top. There was no one to bury them. No one wanted to bother with it.⁷

In the latter period, it got a little better in that concentration camp because the Bessarabian and Romanian Jews rendered help to the Russian and Ukrainian Jews.

In the summer, we were taken to work at the state farm. Since I was weak, I couldn’t work. My sister worked. She couldn’t help me in any way.

In the latter period, the Germans came. They forced us to dig trenches, while they built bunkers. They tormented us greatly. When they forced us out to dig the trenches,

⁵ “Akhmecheevka” in the stenogram. Akmechetka (Akhmechetka on some older maps), about 20 km E of Domanivka. Today, Akmechetka is called Prybuzhzhia. Together with Bohdanivka (17 km N of Akmechetka), Domanivka and Akmechetka were the sites of camps to which the Romanians confined Jews from the Odessa region as well as from prewar Romanian territories. As Brodskaia describes, the Romanians provided next to nothing in the way of food, housing, and heating.

⁶ The date given here is imprecise, as the further course of the interview makes clear. The Red Army appears to have arrived within striking distance of the camp by March 25. The camp was not liberated until March 28, 1944.

⁷ This paragraph describes events immediately after the Red Army liberated the camp.

we were all naked – no galoshes, no shoes, no stockings, no skirts. The population wept when they saw us.

– “How can you run them around like that?”

– “Be quiet, they may all rot here, but they are going to dig trenches!”

At night, those policemen would come and pay visits to the young women.

The German headquarters were at the corner opposite our concentration camp.

On the morning of March 27, a police officer came running to the women and told them to clean his overcoat.⁸ We ask, “What happened?” He says, “It looks like they’re leaving.” We heard that our boys were approaching from beyond the Bug River.

“Who’s there?” “It’s the Red Army.” We thought it was some kind of trick.

On March 26, the Germans came to our camp. “Everybody go outside.” We went outside. We thought they were taking us to be shot, because that very same day, eight kilometers away, all of the Jews were led away, and a lot of them shot. The commandant looked at us and said, “I’m [not] going to take the trouble with these old women!” He sent everyone back into the barracks. In the latter period, there were only 60 of us left of 20,000 people.

On the afternoon of March 27, we saw their wagons, loaded with equipment, leave, they kept leaving. We sat there at the ready the whole night through.

On March 28, at four o’clock, someone knocked at our door. We thought it was the “guests” who often came to see us.

– “Who’s there?”

– “It’s the Red Army.”

We didn’t believe it. We thought it was some kind of trick.

– “Open up, comrades, it’s your boys.”

We opened the door. Can you imagine what happened next? There was such a racket, a commotion, hysteria, tears. We couldn’t believe that we were liberated, that we didn’t have to look out the window every minute – here comes a Romanian, here comes a German. You were no longer afraid of being shot.

Is it even possible to tell you all the details, all the small acts of torment? I lost my son, my father, lost my health. For three years, I endured all that.

Ptchelintseva. – There was an order that all Jews should wear a yellow star on black velvet. Women wore headscarves to cover the star, but the Romanians pulled them off. If a woman tried to defend herself, she was shot. There were so many victims. Corpses were strewn across the pavement. Thousands of bodies were thrown into pits.

⁸ Brodskaja may mean that the policeman wanted coat purged of any markings that showed his role as a camp guard.

The Romanians' attitude toward women: Romanians would enter a courtyard and say, "I want to love."

Ivanova. – There were a lot of corpses laying around near the prison, a lot near the port, and a lot below the old cemetery, since there was a road to the prison there.

Regarding the suicide of Prof. Rabinovich: he poisoned himself at home, but so as not to upset his wife, he left home, walked several blocks, sat down at a tram stop, and died. He lay there for several days. He was gradually robbed and stripped, stripped naked. Finally, one of the university professors sent a car, and his corpse was taken away. His wife tried to collect his body several times, but they wouldn't give it to her.

The Romanians' attitude toward women: Romanians would enter a courtyard and say, "I want to love." I have to say that individual women made great use of this. They made it their livelihood. Women were living with the Romanians left and right. It was a decent income, because the Romanians liked to steal, they knew how to steal, and they took everything they stole back to the woman they were living with.

We didn't have bread for a long time, almost half a year. Only the Romanian soldiers had bread. Women were bought for a piece of bread. It's hard to blame the women who had children. You have to feed your children, you somehow have to live yourself.

When there were Germans around, their attitude toward women was most horrid. As soon as it got dark, women couldn't go outside: the Germans raped left and right, whoever they met on the street. One of the cleaning women, though not from our institution, a 69-year-old woman, was also raped. She died. The Germans would say, "We don't care who it is, so long as she's healthy."

I have to say that there was an incredible amount of venereal disease going around. The Romanians brought a whole lot of diseases here. A whole lot of dispensaries and clinics were set up here. Announcements appeared in newspapers, and posters on the streets with arrows indicating the way to dispensaries. Treatment for venereal diseases was free.

In terms of cleanliness and hygiene, the Germans stood head and shoulders above the Romanians. Among the Romanians, all that was done more simply, more openly. It was impossible to imagine the Germans acting like such beasts. We considered the Germans an old and civilized people, and it was impossible to imagine them doing such things.

Women who had "business" with the Romanians and Germans lived well.

The final period, a month and a half long, was a terrible time. They did the most horrible things. People were shot and burned. On Ostrovidov Street, there was a basement full of Russian men who were first dressed in German clothes and then shot. The fact that they were Russians in German clothes is undeniable.

A lot of people have the impression that we were rolling in clover under the Romanians. Not only were our nerves considerably frayed, we weren't rolling in anything. There was a lot of everything at the market. All of the confectioneries were full of chocolate and cakes, moreover, a lot was imported from Romania. But a person of average means, a white-collar employee, for example, couldn't buy any of it. Individual people got by. Women who had "business" with the Romanians and Germans lived well, and many made a considerable amount of money on Jewish apartments.

I had lived in a building for about fifteen years. Then the occupiers came. After two-three days, several residents started moving to better apartments. They would live in one for a week, take everything, and then move to another. In this way, by moving from apartment to apartment, people would get rich. Then they would either open cheap restaurants or open a store, the so-called *badegi*⁹ did well, and their owners lived in luxury.

Is it possible to exchange high prices and scarcity somewhere deep in Russia for the "delights" we experienced here?

Ptchelintseva. – Over the course of the first days after the occupiers captured the city, they would break into apartments, smash the locks of the apartments and rooms of those who had been evacuated, especially Jews. Under the guise of looking for a gun, they would enter apartments and take watches, things made of silver, stuff like that. They especially liked to steal sugar. Bribery began to run rampant. For example, for things like a leather bag or a lump of sugar, you could get various groceries by the bucketful from the soldiers standing guard outside factories and plants.

The Germans were extraordinarily cruel and conceited with regard to the Russians.

Ivanova. – Since the Romanians are coarser by nature and less civilized, less was expected of them. The Germans are a civilized, West-European people. They were extraordinarily cruel and conceited with regard to the Russians.

As for relations between middle and lower military ranks, what stood out was the complete absence of cordial ties between senior and junior personnel. Relations between the Romanians and Germans were extraordinarily strained. In the latter period, the [Romanians] were drinking something awful.

I was told the following story. The [Romanians] were sitting at a table¹⁰. One of them said in broken German, "Give me some jam, please." The hostess served him half

⁹ "Badega" appears to be a Romanian word for a wine bar or tavern. The term, which appears to be related to the Spanish "bodega," was also known in Odessa, see

<https://argo.academic.ru/205/%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B0>.

¹⁰ Typo, it should be Romanians.

a kilo of jam. He grabbed it in his fist and threw it at Hitler's portrait. He did the same thing a second time, and asked for jam for a third time. The hostess was terrified because if someone came in, she would get in trouble and the bodega could be shut down. Another soldier demanded jam, as well. "We ran out of jam," she said, and tried to show them the door.

They were really tired of fighting. They saw no incentives of the war for themselves. They hated the Germans, especially Hitler, very much.

They were chastened by our high level of culture, which they hadn't expected to encounter in the Soviet lands.

Ptchelintseva. We were surprised by the attitude of the higher [Romanian] military ranks, officers and non-commissioned officers, toward their orderlies. When an officer came to our library, his orderly would stand behind his chair. The officer was working on a book at the time, and the orderly wasn't allowed to sit down until the officer finished working. That seemed very strange to us.

At first, they had an exceptionally arrogant attitude toward us Soviet people. Over the course of the year, things changed. They were chastened by our high level of culture, which they hadn't expected to encounter in the Soviet lands. They were awfully interested in Soviet literature. They were very interested in Soviet fiction. Of the Soviet writers, they would ask a lot about Sholokhov especially.¹¹ They were ready to search the entire city for his books. Dostoevskii enjoyed considerable popularity among the classics. Why – I don't know. L.N. Tolstoi [as well]. Their jaws literally dropped at the sight of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia. It was a real discovery for them – such a tremendous publication, so interesting, and such a high scientific level. They hadn't imagined we'd have anything like it. By chance, we started to understand something of their conversations, it was possible to conclude that they were amazed. They snatched up the Great Soviet Encyclopedia wherever they could. They looked for it in libraries and at private dealers and would spend a lot of money on it. They would also buy individual volumes.

Ivanova. – They were very interested in the Soviet finance system. When they began to issue pensions, all of the laws concerning pensions were taken in their entirety from the Soviet system. They took the Soviet code of law and regulations in its entirety and sent us a collection of Romanian law in exchange. They would sit here and study the history of law. They wanted to take all of this back with them to Iași University, as well as to Bucharest. On the one hand, it was sad to lose the books, on the other hand, we were proud of what we had.

¹¹ Mikhail Sholokhov (1905-1984) was the preeminent author of Soviet literature's school of Socialist Realism. He had just published the final book of his epic novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* a year before the invasion.

Ptchelintseva. – We had mixed feelings – on the one hand it was a pity, on the other hand, let them have them. We’ll get others. Sometimes they hid cards from the catalogs, and sometimes they demanded not only books, but the catalogs, too. We would go to the storage rooms and looked for them there.

The director was an old colleague of ours who was in charge of the book museum. With the arrival of the Romanians, she became the library director. She was appointed by the council, since the library was run by the council.

Colonel Liza¹² came one day. He spoke Russian fluently. He was very rude to us and in particular to our director. He realized we weren’t really going out of our way for the Romanians, we didn’t really want to please them and we didn’t want to give everything away. He called us “Soviet academics hiding behind the Bolsheviks.” Among other things, he would scold our director for holding back books, not giving them out, despite all sorts of orders.

Ivanova. – At the very beginning, the library was declared under the auspices of the Germans, and then later it was transferred to the Romanians.

We received rations, but far from regularly.

The invaders arrived on October 16. We got our first compensation in March. We got nothing from October until March.

We didn’t get any bread for a long time, and there was no water for a long time either. Before leaving, the Soviet authorities expanded access to the distribution centers. We got quite a lot of sugar and bottles of vegetable oil from there. That supported us for several months.

¹² Could be a typo. Lica is a common Romanian last name: <https://forebears.io/surnames/lica>