

Translation: Christopher Tauchen

Recorded during a personal interview by Berta Likhter, senior researcher for the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War, on February 19, 1944.

City of Stalino¹, Donbass².

Praskoviya Polikarpovna Samokoneva — a cleaner at the Stalino Industrial Institute

I was born in 1907. I'm thirty-six years old (though I look at least seventy – everyone thinks I'm grandmother). I had a good life until the war. My husband had a job, and I was working as a courier and cleaner at the Stalino Regional Consumers' Union. I had two children, both boys. They went to school and did quite well. The oldest, born in 1926, had finished fifth grade before the war. He was a good boy, a smart one. Now he's 17. He's always playing with the younger children. Because of what happened he's not altogether right in the head³.

My husband was drafted in October 1941, before the Germans came. I haven't heard anything about him since then.

We were speaking Yiddish. Someone must have heard us and turned me in.

In the spring of 1942 I was picked up by the Gestapo. I lived with Jews for a long time, so I can speak Yiddish⁴. On a sunny day I went out to sit on a grassy area near my home. This old Jewish woman I know approached me. The Jews in Stalino were gradually being killed off. She started telling me how awful it was and who had died. We were speaking Yiddish. Someone must have heard us and turned me in. They took me that night. They told me to get dressed quickly and get in the car.

¹ Established in 1869, this settlement, now the city of Donetsk, was originally named Yuzovka for its principal founder John Hughes. It was renamed Stalin in 1924, then Stalino in 1929. In the wake of de-Stalinization, the city became Donetsk in 1961. The Soviets returned to Stalino in the first week of September 1943.

² Donbass: Abbreviation for Donetsk Basin, a sprawling coal and industrial region on both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian border.

³ Praskoviya's son, Aleksandr Nikitovich Samokon' was called up for service in the Red Army and sent to the front on July 2, 1944. He subsequently disappeared. A search filed by his mother in 1956 has been preserved in the archives. See: https://pamyat-naroda.ru/heroes/memorial-chelovek_dopolnitelnoe_donesenie72531384/

⁴ In her 1956 letter to the military commissariat (see note 3), Praskoviya Samokoneva lists her address as Skomoroshino. Local historians have described this settlement as having been inhabited by Jews. See: <https://kashkaha.livejournal.com/25672.html/> ; <http://dongeosociety.ru/oreshkova-28/>.

They brought me to Smolianka⁵, where the Gestapo had set up a prison in the stockyard. There were many Jews with me in the car. They were all taken somewhere, while I was put in a cell. There were so many people in there that you couldn't stand, let alone sit. It was cold, damp, and cramped. They'd put someone in just as soon as they removed someone else. I spent eighteen days in there. I nearly starved. They'd give us 100 grams of bread and a cup of water. That cell had so many people, such bad air. The stench, the lice. They took me to the mine a few times. I watched as they shot people and dumped them there. It scared me – everyone was telling them that I was a Jew.

I was all swollen: my hands, my feet. I barely made it out. Once they brought my oldest son. In front of him they beat me and threatened to shoot me. That frightened him so much he went mad. Now he's fit for nothing. The doctors don't think he'll get better. Now, after all that torture, I look like an old woman, a grandmother. I especially hated that thing they yelled in German: "Geh weg!"⁶ I kept thinking: "You parasites, your time will come." And now it has.

⁵ Smolianka: a village near Mine 11 B, which was part of Stalino's Kuybyshev District.

⁶ Geh weg: German, for "go away!"