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[L.1] Commission for the compilation of the Great Patriotic War chronicle.

Transcript of conversation with Serafima Valukina

The interview was conducted by the researcher F.L. Yelovtsan.

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Serafima Valukina was born in 1890. She is Russian.

I was born in Astrakhan, in the village of Ivanchikovo. I have been a member of the party since 1925. I arrived in Brest on July 16, 1941 to visit my son. My son was the head of the House of the Red Army. He arrived from a resort on Friday, on Saturday he was already on duty. He took a pillow and left. On Saturday he came and was somewhat unhappy. And he has always had problems with his nervous system. He said, "Somehow my heart hurts. Now the German plane has been shot down." I asked, "Misha, maybe it's a war?" He said, "It's ok, mom, you will be the first to leave."

I spent the night alone at home. A military commissar, the chairman of a military tribunal, a certain Stepanov, lived in our house. Suddenly there was a rumble. Shells and bombs started exploding, houses were on fire. My gut feeling told me that this was war. I grabbed my granddaughter naked and ran out into the yard. I put her down. A janitor said, "What are you doing?"

My son came running and said, "Hide in the basement, in two hours we will drive them away."

We ran to the basement. I just had time to take the child, this janitor was wounded. The whole house gathered in the basement. There was a major, a certain Sergeev. He came for his family. I rushed to give him some civilian clothes, they changed him. He had a son and two little twins. We put him in a corner and buried our documents, because we were all party members there.

When the bombing started, Stepanov, the chairman of the military tribunal, arrived by car and took his wife. My son asked him to take at least women with children. He took nobody.

We stayed there. When it began to dawn, the Germans were walking along the street in disguise. I got cold feet and thought, "Well, it's all over." They were all disguised, they were covered in branches. We stayed there for three days and did not come out. Poles said, "Don't get out. The Germans will come now, they will gouge out your eyes."

[L.1 the reverse side] On the fourth day we went outside. We saw people dragging some flour, some skin, some bread from the shops. We were standing and not

taking anything. Then a Polish janitor brought us some bread and a bun for 20 people. Then they started giving bread in bakeries with passports. The Germans started beating us, they didn't give us any bread. They stopped some people, and didn't stop others. I grew bolder. Some Germans were walking and carrying 2 loaves of bread. I thought, "Why don't I ask if he will give it to me." I asked, "Please, give a piece of bread for my child." He looked at me like a beast, then took out a loaf and said, "Here you are, matka, hide it for your child." ["Matka" is the Polish for "mother"]

He ran away and shook his finger at me, sort of showing, "Don't reveal that I gave it to you."

We came to our apartment. Everything was stolen from us and we were kicked out. After that, they started collecting our wounded. The streets were full of the dead and the wounded. On the sixth day, I went to the hospitals to look for my family. All the wounded were taken to the railway hospital and there were escorts. The wounded stayed there for a month and a half, and then they were driven to a range 7 km away. They were forced to put up wire. They made three wire fences. We started going there, at first illegally. They were shouting, they were hungry. I would put my granddaughter on my shoulders, she was not yet three years old.

There was a great commissar, a certain Cherenyzhenko. He asked to find out about his family. I did it. A bomb killed them, but I didn't tell him. He was badly wounded, he was brought from under Kobrin. He started asking them to bring him some bread and tobacco. I would go illegally. Some German would let me go, and another wouldn't. Then they forbid going there. I would come to the wire, say something. They allowed us to speak through the wire for five minutes. After that, they did not let us go there at all. Then they allowed us to bring some things to the wounded on Tuesday and Friday. The villagers carried everything there, we collected different things and brought them there. The villagers asked us. The villagers brought milk in cans there.

I had the only dress in which I had come here. I put it on. I came. We knew that we were allowed to have a meeting. Sometimes you would load two baskets, take your granddaughter and you would go there. There was a translator. A German took the baskets, looked them over, gave them to the orderly, and the latter had to pass them on to the wounded. We only approached and were allowed to go, then another German rode in and started beating us with whips. A horse was trampling people. I was pressed against the wire, and I was hanging with my only dress on the wire. Everyone ran away, but I just couldn't leave with the child and two baskets. I walked along the highway, walked about a kilometer. Then I saw a German chasing me with a stick, "Matka, zurück, get back."

He brought me back. The Germans looked over the basket, they said to pass it on. When I handed it over, they let me go. Everyone started running again. Again about 20 people arrived, then again everybody was driven away. After that, parcels were not allowed. But we wanted to get to our people.

Here some girls got a job, they couldn't go themselves, they passed the things to me. It was already winter, there were severe frosts. I took a sled, an ax, a sack, I took

another old woman with me, and we went there as if for firewood. We arrived there. There was a typhoid hospital. Not far away there was a huge ravine [L.2] full of firewood. When an officer walked by, we climbed into the ravine, and then we climbed out of the ravine. Nevertheless, I came across an officer who said, "Matka, why did you come?"

I said, "I came to get firewood." He searched me, found nothing. He said, "Don't come here."

The guy was young. And I had some fresh eggs in my pockets. I took out two eggs and put them into his pocket. He said, "Well, matka, gut, gut, there is Holz, there is a lot of firewood in the ravine. If the officers come, I will holler."

They were already waiting for us there. The sick needed milk and kissel [a kind of starchy jelly]. This is how we collected firewood.

After that, it was again very scary. We were walking and ran into a German. We needed to go through three posts. If we passed the first, the second would detain us. If we passed the second, the third one would detain us. I was given a fake certificate. The German asked me, "Ukrainian? Polish? Russian?" I was thinking hard what to answer, I said, "Ukrainian." He replied, "Ah, gut, gut, go take Holz."

So I went there. As soon as I loaded the firewood, a whole car of officers was driving by. The guys, Golovanushkin, Lapin, shouted to me, "It's ok, come on, this German is ours. Whatever you have to pass on, pass it on to him."

Since they shouted to us, we went ahead boldly. When I came, a German came too and said, "Matka, Speck?, he showed, "Put it here in the snow."

I put it next to him. He stood up to it, blocked it, and said, "Run."

I just ran to the corner, looked around, our guys shouted, "Don't be afraid, go away. He passed it on to us."

The guys used to shout, "This German will be standing there on such and such a date."

Sometimes when you came he was standing there. And recently they had taken him away. People brought parcels to him, he was right there, and we had to throw a parcel over three rows of wire. After this German, some other officers were appointed.

Finally, the guys who had recovered needed to run away, they needed certificates. A certain Nina worked for the Germans. She got certificates. She was then shot with her children. We contacted her, organized some things a little, got certificates and wire cutters to cut the wire. When we got there, we felt that these wire cutters were burning us. What if they would find us? I tucked them into my skirt. If they searched us, I thought they would fall down somewhere. The snow was deep. They asked, "Why did you come?"

I looked – there was a lot of firewood. We asked the Germans if we could take firewood. They let us do it. The Germans came up and asked what we had. I said we had nothing. Wire cutters fell into the snow and they did not see them. It was a load off my mind.

Nina and Golovanushkina were with me. We used to tie a bag under the sled. The sled was sliding on the snow, you couldn't see it. The sled was empty, the ax was on top. So you could carry it. While the sentry went to another corner, we went there. Two or three people came there and took it. I wrote to whom it was. I passed a newspaper there and put some documents in a bottle and carried them in a felt boot.

[L.2 the reverse side] There was steam heating and large pipes. The Germans closed these pipes behind the wire. It was necessary to open these hatches. There was a door, a jamb, there was a log so that the hatches could not be opened from there. They were numbered. The guys would tell you how to open the hatch. The sentry walked right there. I just wonder now how we had the guts to do it. As if we didn't know, we would take this log, chop it, and put it in a bag. We opened up the hatch. That night 20 people escaped, including Commissar Cherenyzhenko and Grisha, I don't know his last name. He then became a partisan. We went with his wife. She lived in the Zhabinsky district. She was shot. He was a veterinarian, now he works as the chief of the fire department here.

A friend of mine had a stamp. She worked, she got the forms and stamped them. We made these forms and threw them behind the wire. There they wrote their documents themselves. We got three passports. There was Lieutenant Vasily Glukhov. He recovered and ran away.

There was a house whose windows overlooked the highway, the patrols were walking by it. There we threw them a hammer and pliers, those for tearing off nails. They wrote us notes in bottles about what they needed. We knew in what place the bottle fell, you would pretend to fix your boots, pick up this bottle and go. It was cold outside, and you were getting hot. They wrote, "Find my family and say that I am here." You went, you found a family, you said it to them. I would put my granddaughter on a sled and took her as an exhibit as if there was no one to leave her with, since they sympathized with children. She, poor thing, would freeze. You dragged her together with firewood, but you couldn't throw the firewood off as the Germans would notice it.

On March 14, 1942, all the camps were eliminated. There were many of our sisters there. They asked to bring them stockings. Once there was no way for me to pass them on to them. I put on these stockings. I said to a German, "I have two pairs of stockings, can I give a pair to somebody?"

He checked that there was nothing there and tossed them over.

When they were leaving, the cars were standing on the railroad for two hours. One person threw a note and wrote my address so that I should come running as soon as possible. The railway man was a good person, he knew me, he came running right away and said, "There are two echelons of prisoners." I came running. They didn't let us come closer. When the cars started, it was as if by accident a piece of paper flew out with the wind. We picked up this piece of paper and had to give the address as to what prisoners of war had left. There came letters of thanks afterwards.

Nina died when we released 20 people. We were usually gathering at her place. She took a vacation, went to fetch the children. They were at the shelter. She wanted to

hit the road altogether. Suddenly she was called here. She worked for the Germans in the hospital in the dental office. She arrived, as soon as she entered the apartment, she was immediately arrested. We brought her some food, the guards took it from us. If we gave the guys a hundred, they would pass the food to her. Then they stopped accepting it. Later we heard that she had been shot. They shouted to us through the window that she was no longer alive. She used to work in a hospital. I used to come, she would take out a pot of soup for me and we would talk there. She said, "Such and such house number." I would go, get an assignment and return. People couldn't come to me either.

When there was an escape on the 20th, they started following us. The prisoners shouted to us not to come here for this firewood anymore. [L.3] They shouted, "Nina is in trouble, don't come here anymore."

I put on different clothes, put on a nice hat. I didn't walk around ragged. I needed to find out about something. They took two of our women and they found notes with them in which it was written where the front was going, and they found a newspaper. We needed to find out where these women were taken. I dressed in a young fashion, took my briefcase and walked through the village. They used to call me "matka". They did not recognize me, I was walking like a young girl. Valya Glukhova, a lieutenant's wife, was walking along. We were walking, talking and did not stop. We were told, "The women are in prison, there is nothing terrible, they are on trial, one will be shot, the other one will be sentenced to 3 months in prison." One of them was Jewish, she was shot. The Russian was later released. It turns out she was recruited. When she got out of prison, she didn't even greet us, she just said to the women, "Don't come to me anymore and don't talk to me," she confessed to us sincerely, "try not to meet with me."

After that, she showed horns, went to the Germans, but the girl was young. No one from our organization got caught, although she knew everyone, she did not betray anyone.

When they started taking people to Germany, they came at night and took them away. I knew some local Russians. They spoke German well, everybody spoke it in some way. They came, told me that one of those days there would be a big raid. They said, "Go to all your acquaintances, tell the girls – at such and such a time there will be a raid, try to escape." A girl, for example, worked in an institution and spent the night there, but she told the Germans that she worked in the evening.

When our troops were already advancing, we had been sitting in the trenches. We tried to put girls inside the trenches, and we ourselves went up. The Germans would come up and say, "Oh, old woman!", and they would leave.

We were not connected with the partisans. The women went around the villages, and I fell down, broke two ribs, and had to stay in bed for 2 months. They came and visited me. I couldn't lift anything heavy. Local Russian doctors supported me well, treated me for free. The Easterners would go to the village, and they were closely followed, they couldn't get anything. We would get some bandages, they needed caps, trousers, military jackets. You would collect money somewhere from friends, you would come to the market, buy these things and give everything to them through girls.

We helped the Frunzensky detachment most of all, and we gave medicines to Chernyak's detachment twice.

There was a local family here. They were from a rich village of Azit 35 km away. They had 2 brothers and a mother there. She and her husband lived in the city. She didn't work during all the war. We did everything through them. We would come to her and talk. I was at their place only 2 times, and for the third time I couldn't go there. You would meet somewhere in the street, or when you were standing in line for bread, or you would go to the market. You would stand near some man, bargain with him, even though you didn't need to buy anything. You would see that there were no police, you would start talking to her. She, poor thing, got in trouble with her husband. Her brother worked in the police and through him they communicated with the partisans. Some time before he had joined the partisans. When he got caught, apparently he had been betrayed, she and her husband were shot in the spring of 1944. They helped us so much, my God, and their own people gave her away.

We used to go to the villages and ask for food. The Germans [L.3 the reverse side] brought many prisoners there in 1942, who signed up as Ukrainians. They were dismissed here. They were almost naked, hungry. We came. There were 4 families living in our apartment. A woman cooked for us. We fed them lunch, then they went on. We advised the guys to go to the village. Then we contacted them when we started going to this village. When they started to be pursued, they went into the forest. They spent the night in the forest, and at day time they would come to the host. Azit was considered partisan, we couldn't go there. Then we got in touch through these policemen.

In our group of those who went to fetch firewood, there was Nina, me, Nadezhda Gribakina, Vasilyeva, Zanina, Katya Garay, Valya Glukhova, Valya Sazonova. We all went there.

One local policeman married an eastern woman. When we met her, she said, "Come to my husband, he is a good man. If there are Ukrainians, he will help them get out of the range."

We went to the policeman and said, "Give us the documents to leave the range."

We came to see this woman, she turned on the gramophone. Her husband came angry and said, "I can only help Ukrainians. If they signed up as Ukrainians, I will help."

They somehow started to crawl out, told him fictitious last names. He gave documents for six people. We paid for it. Nina and I went to him. I was walking like an old woman, but she was young, as if at my request, as if I did not understand anything and she helped me. They asked, "What does she want?" Nina said, "She confirms that they are Ukrainians."

For each passport then we gave 3 kilos of salo [cured pork fat], and at that time salo was very expensive. You came to the village, bought it, exchanged it for something else. We got passports for 6 people. The guys left, we had no connection with them, they only thanked us. You would give them your address, they would come at night, knock

and nothing else. If a person was a friend, he would knock 6 times, and if there were 3 knocks – this was someone from the police. None of the policemen would knock 6 times. Those people asked us to get bandages, or pants, or a cap. We didn't know who came. They would only say, "Bring it to such and such a house."

We took it to 16, Batarega street. The owner of this apartment took it all with her daughter. She was going to become a partisan. She had been working very openly lately. She had a large bag of medicine. I told her, "Katya, what are you doing?" She answered, "Nothing... They'll leave soon."

Some guys would come to her, seal it in a box and make a sticker "nails". If some man passed by, he would just think those are nails and that's it, no one would pick on it.

We usually went to the camp from the side of the cemetery. Once I took the child, we came up with Dusya. Some people went to bury somebody from another detachment. Grisha, Dusya's husband, was not there. Out of nowhere came a German and ran into her in the forest. And he was terribly afraid of the forest. He approached her and said, "What are you doing in the woods?" [L.4] She was frightened. He said, "Are you alone?"

And Valya and I were standing under a bush. We looked at each other. Out of nowhere, a big cow appeared. He was distracted by this cow. He asked, "What's in your bag?" We said that we went to the village, begged to give us something. They did and so we were going. He looked at us, his attention was switched to that cow, he took her, and said to us, "Go to the road."

Then he left with the cow, and we left the forest.

In 1942, one hundred women and children of Easterners were shot in the Zhabinsky forest.

Before the war, I worked in Saratov in Tabaktorg [tobacco selling company]. I am not working now.