

EHRI Online Course in Holocaust Studies

The Holocaust in Ukraine – German Mass Shootings

Translation: *B09 Babi Yar Survivor Dina Pronicheva describes her ordeal to Soviet Historians, 24 April 1946*

Shorthand Report

of a conversation with Dina Mironovna Pronicheva, witness to the German crimes at Babyn Yar.

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Taken down in shorthand by Zh. V. Vil'kova

Kyiv. 24 April 1946

I was born in the city of Chernihiv on 7 January 1911. I lived in Chernihiv until the age of five. Since the age of five I have always lived in the city of Kyiv. By nationality I am a Jew. My education is unfinished higher education. I completed a theatrical technical school and a military communications school, and entered a theatrical institute, but did not complete it.

In 1941 I was working at a puppet theatre. The war began, and the theatre fell apart. I went to work in the communications branch at the staff of the 37<sup>th</sup> Army. I could not work in communications long because of family circumstances and was transferred to a different department as a senior typist with the staff of the 37<sup>th</sup> Army. Later the staff of the 37<sup>th</sup> Army was located at 30 Voroshilov Street.

I arrived for work at the staff office on 17 September 1941 and was told that we were retreating. My chief, Major Bogdanov, told me that I could stay behind because I had small children. Thus I stayed behind.

Germans entered Kyiv on 19 September 1941.

On 20 September my husband came home from encirclement. He had made his way with his unit from Przemyśl to Fastiv, where the unit was encircled and they were released.

The mood naturally was one of panic. There was neither food, nor water, nor light. Nothing.

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Fires broke out in Kyiv on 24 and 25 September. The Khreshchatyk was blown up, and Pushkin and Sverdlov Streets were burning. Hunting for Jews began. Germans were going from flat to flat at night, searching for Jews. I was living with my mother-in-law. She was a pious woman, and icons were hanging on the walls, and when Germans came she pointed to the icons to indicate that we were Russians, and they did not bother me.

There were rumours in the city that all the fires were occurring because of Jews who had remained here and had not been evacuated. Then on 28 September 1941 an order appeared throughout the city in which it was written: all Jews are to take warm and valuable things and appear at eight in the morning the next day, that is, 29 September, Degtiarev Street. The punishment for failing to appear was execution. The signature was from the commandant's office.

My two brothers had left for the front. My younger sister had stayed behind with sick and elderly relatives. They asked me to accompany them because they thought that Jews would be deported somewhere because it was necessary to take warm things, and I went with them. The children stayed at home with my husband.

I was at my mother's place at seven o'clock in the morning, and soon after seven we set off for the place indicated in the order. It was impossible to get through the streets: carts, cars and two-wheeled carts were transporting belongings. There was a terrible rumble. Very many people were walking: old men, mothers with infants in arms, old women. We walked with a crowd.

When we arrived at the gate to the Jewish cemetery, we saw a barbed-wire fence and anti-tank obstructions and Germans and Ukrainians who were letting people pass behind the barrier. You could go in there quite freely, but no one except for the carters was allowed to leave.

I seated my relatives beside the cemetery gate and went to see what happening further ahead. Along the Jewish cemetery there was a long fence which turned left. I went straight in

order to see where people were turning off and why they were going there. I thought that a train was waiting there, but I saw that Germans were immediately taking away furs, taking away food and putting it to the side, clothing to another side, and people were going straight.

They were selecting a large number of people, then stopping them for a time and selecting more. When it was my turn, I wanted at first to get away, but they would not let me. I went back to my old folks, didn't tell them anything in order not to disturb them, and went with them. My relatives' things were taken away. They went straight and then turned right, and there I lost them. I was separated from them by a crowd as they went straight. It seemed to me that we were walking for a long time. Suddenly I heard the voice of an old man in the crowd behind me. "My children, help me walk. I'm blind." I felt sorry for the old man and went with him. I asked him, "Granddad, where are we being taken?" He said to me, "Don't you know, child? We're going to pay God the last honours."

Then I saw an area with two rows of Germans on both sides. One or two of them had straps or dog leashes wrapped around their hands. All of them were holding rubber truncheons or large heavy sticks. We were supposed to pass through this whole corridor, as I call it, this slaughter. Everyone passed through. I stopped because I was afraid to go on.

As people passed through the corridor, Germans on both sides invariably beat them. If anyone fell, he was set upon by a dog, which tore his clothes and flesh. The person would willy-nilly get up and run down, where he would be seized by policemen who stripped people naked, beating them terribly wherever they liked with whatever was at hand: their hands or their feet. Some policemen were wearing knuckledusters on their hands.

People walked towards the executions completely bloodied. I wasn't proceeding yet and saw everything from above without reaching the corridor. But when I looked down at the naked people, my mother recognized me from below and shouted to me, "Darling, you don't look [like a Jew]. Escape." I wanted to rush to protect them, but the instinct of self-preservation told me

that I couldn't rescue them. I had to pass through the corridor under blows from German staves, but I walked without stooping. I walked upright and endured everything.

I went straight down to a policeman and immediately asked him in Ukrainian where the commandant was. He asked why I wanted the commandant. I said that I was a Ukrainian, not a Jew. I had come to accompany my co-workers and had ended up here by accident. He gave me a strange look and asked for my papers. I showed him my trade-union membership card and work-book, where nationality is not indicated. He believed me because my surname is Russian and my patronymic also sounds Russian. He pointed to a mound where a small group of people was sitting and said, "Sit down and wait until evening. We'll let you go after we've shot all the Jews."

I walked up to the mound and sat down. At first I looked at all the horrors: people were being undressed and beaten before my eyes. They were laughing hysterically, apparently losing their minds and turning grey in a matter of minutes. Infants were being torn from their mothers' arms and thrown over a sand wall. All the naked people in groups of two or three were led up to a height with a sand wall and notches in it. People went in there and did not come out.

I had thrown away my identity card before reaching the "corridor." I was still waiting for evening and did not know what lay ahead of me.

In the evening a car arrived and the German officer who had been sitting in it said that we should all be shot, giving the reason that if even one person got away from here he would talk in the city about what he had seen here, and then the next day not a single Jew would appear here.

We were all led to be shot at the sandy notch where everyone else had been shot. But we were not undressed because it was growing dark and the Germans were tired. I was approximately in the second group of ten. Coming out the so-called door, from this notch, to the left there was a small ledge where all the people formed up and were executed from the

opposite side with machine-guns. People fell into a very, very deep abyss. I shut my eyes, squeezed my fists and threw myself down before a shot came. Of course, it seemed to me that I was flying a whole eternity because I was very high. I felt neither pain while I was falling nor the impact, nothing. My only wish was to live.

At first I was covered in blood. Blood was pouring from my face. I heard moaning. After our execution, there weren't many of us, no one else was executed. We were on top. Then I heard dying hiccups and weeping. It was all coming from dying people.

The Germans were shining torches from above and shooting down to finish off those were still alive. Near me someone was groaning loudly, and the Germans, who were obviously annoyed by this, walked over the corpses and finished off anyone who was still moving.

One of the policemen or Germans (I cannot remember who) stumbled upon me because I was lying on top and flew over me so that I turned over. He shone his torch. He did not see blood on my body, and my clothing had not been pierced by bullets, and he told a German about this. He said that they would check, and I was lifted up, beaten and then thrown down. I did not moan or groan. He stood with one foot on my chest and with the other on my hand, but I did not groan even then. They decided that I was dead, left me alone and went away.

After a while I heard almost above my ear, "Demydenko, come here, fill it in." Then I heard some sort of indistinct blows. They were coming closer and closer, and then I felt that sand was being shovelled over me. The corpses were being covered up. It became very difficult for me because I was lying face up.

I do not know how long I lay there, but when I started suffocating, I did not have enough air, I gathered all my strength and began floundering. I decided that better I be shot than buried alive. I managed to move my good right hand (the German had crushed my left hand when he stepped on it) and when it was free I pushed the sand away from my face. I swallowed sand along with air and started coughing. I was scared that they would find me and finish me off. I

was still hoping to get out and escape. I tried to cough more quietly. I felt a little better. I began flailing about and crawled out.

It was impossible to look around to decide where to go because there was sand in my eyes, and besides it had grown dark.

After lying for a while in the dark and getting accustomed to the gloom I saw that I was surrounded by four walls at a great distance and had to crawl towards the wall from which we had fallen. I crawled in that direction. With great difficulty, making my last efforts, I clambered to the top. Just then someone called out to me. It was a boy of about fourteen whose name was Motia. I told him to be quiet, and we crawled off together. He listened to everything I told him.

We crawled on the surface for a long time, but we could not get away because there were ravines on all sides.

Dawn was breaking. We had to hide and descended two or two and a half metres behind one of the execution walls and hid in the bushes.

When dawn broke, we saw on the side opposite Kurenivka that Germans were leading two Jewish women. I am certain that they were Jewish because I heard them shouting in Yiddish. There were seven Germans. They took turns raping the women, then stabbed them with daggers and threw them down. Then I saw an elderly woman running along the opposite side and a boy of six or seven running after her and shouting, "Grandma, I'm scared!" as she waved him away. Two Germans caught up with them and first killed the boy and then the old woman.

I also saw a woman approach with a child in her arms. She was looking down, laughing and talking with the Germans who were shooting.

Then, towards evening, I started hallucinating: I constantly saw my father, mother and sister in front of me. They were wearing long white robes. They were all laughing and turning somersaults, and I laughed with them, then lost consciousness and fell over the precipice.

When I came to, Motia was sitting beside me and crying. He thought that I had died. I quickly understood where I was, and we continued crawling. It was now quite dark. We crawled to the end of the projection of the valley where we had been crawling and sat down among bushes. In order to escape we had to crawl through a large meadow, go up and only then reach the Kurenivka grove.

We agreed that since he was almost completely undressed and I was wearing dark clothing he would go first and if everything was all right he would shake a branch and I would follow.

But when he crawled through, he was caught by guards and immediately shot. I almost lost consciousness. I was alone again. There was sand all around. I picked up some sand, made a little hole, then filled it in, cried over it as if it were a grave, and thus buried the boy.

The second night was coming to an end. Dawn was breaking. I saw that I was sitting in bushes beside a road. When light came, I could be spotted. There was a lane to my left, and I ran there headlong. No one saw me. It turned out to be a refuse dump. I buried myself up to my neck in the refuse, covered myself with rags and paper and placed a basket over my head. Nearby I saw two large green tomatoes, but I would have to crawl to them. I immediately became thirsty. I tried to think about something else, but I kept turning in that direction and wondering how to get those tomatoes. The instinct of self-preservation won out.

I stayed in that hole until darkness came that third day. When night fell, I got out and crawled to a glade. I crawled for a long time, fell into a trench with barbed wire, but managed to crawl out of it and continued crawling carefully on my stomach.

I crawled all night and got to the first house. I wanted to run inside this first cottage and explain how I had escaped, how much I had suffered. Perhaps people would rescue me. But everyone was sleeping. I dashed into a half-open shed because a dog jumped at me and stood there until dawn. The shed was empty. The dog kept barking at me.

The woman of the house came out and found me in the shed, and I had to come out. When she asked me, "How did you get here?" I sensed a threat in her tone and immediately lost my

desire to describe what had happened to me. I lied and said that I was coming back from the trenches, that I was from Bila Tserkva, and asked about the way to the city commandant, who could help me get home. She said, "We'll show you the way," and sent her son somewhere. About five minutes later her son brought a German officer and, pointing at me, said, "Here's a Jew, sir." The German hit me and ordered me to follow him. I went after him unquestioningly.

He brought me to a house where Germans were residing. They were eating breakfast. Although this was my fourth day, I did not want to eat. The German officer ordered them to guard me and left. They ordered me to clean the house: sweep, wipe the windows, and wash the dishes. I did everything in silence, trying to be completely calm. Then these Germans left, and only one stayed behind to guard me.

After a while the German officer came back with the housewife's son. They brought two girls of about sixteen or seventeen who were screaming, crying, kissing the German officer's boots and begging to be made to do the hardest possible work if only they stayed alive.

He pushed them away with irritation and ordered me to follow them. We were all taken away somewhere. They took us to the place where we had been undressed four days earlier. Only here did I realize that I had been crawling around for four days and was now back at the same place.

There was a lot of clothing and shoes. Everything was lying in separate piles. Some people were sitting behind the things. There weren't many of them—about thirty or forty. I saw that they were elderly men and women—the remainder of the Jews who had been seized in their flats and who could not walk. There was also a woman with two children, one of them an infant. She was screaming very loudly. A very calm nurse was sitting beside her. Her name, I learned later, was Liuba.

She felt sorry for me. I was trembling and was obviously cold. She spread out her overcoat, invited me to sit down beside her and covered my legs with half of the coat. Of all the people



who were sitting there only we two were completely calm—at least outwardly. We sat like that for an hour or two, I don't know how long.

Towards evening a large vehicle filled with our prisoners-of-war drove up. They all had spades. We were all placed in the vehicle and taken away in an unknown direction.

Liuba and I agreed that when an opportunity presented itself we would jump out and run off. If we were shot, that would be an unexpected death, better than sitting somewhere and waiting to die.

We were taken to the garages across from the Jewish cemetery. But the garages were filled with Jews, and there was no room there. We were taken somewhere else. In the Shuliavka area first I and then Liuba managed to jump over the back of the vehicle almost unnoticeably because everyone inside was looking ahead in the direction in which we were being driven.

Since it was growing dark and we had to spend the night somewhere (I was afraid to go home), I suggested to Liuba that we go to her cousin, a Polish woman by nationality who had stayed behind in Kyiv. We went to her. She took us in, and the two of us spent the whole night heating water and soaking off the shirt that had stuck to my wounds.

There was a police raid during the night. They covered me with pillows, sat down on them and in this way saved me.

In the morning Liuba and I went to Darnytsia (the DVRZ [Darnytsia carriage-repair plant]) and settled in a carriage. Liuba went out to the kitchen-gardens and dug up the remains of the potato crop. We cooked them over splinters of wood, concealing the fire so that we wouldn't be spotted. Then she found a dirty box of mouldy green crusts, washed them in a puddle and gave them to me as a gift because I was ill.

We were discovered on the third day. Two Germans and a plant engineer came by. The engineer, who took me for someone else, said to me, "I think you worked for us in the tool-shop." I hastened to agree that I had worked there, and he told the Germans that I was local. I

had already said that Liuba was my relative. We had been in the trenches and had come home, but our building had been destroyed and that was why we had settled here.

They believed us and suggested that we settle in the former army barracks because the plant was being fenced in and it would be impossible to live nearby.

Then Germans came there. They were reconstruction units who were recruiting workers to rebuild the plant. They needed registrars, but because Liuba had a decent command of German (I knew very little, although I did know Latin) they made me the office registrar and Liuba became a translator).

Thus there could be no suspicion about us. Then Germans were settled in the barracks and we had to leave. Out of charity the bosses accepted us in the kitchen on the condition that we launder, darn, fetch water, iron, cook, fetch firewood, slaughter and butcher. In short, do absolutely everything while still working at the office.

We agreed. What else was there to do? The winter was severe. There was nothing for us to wear, and we were hungry. When we cooked for them, we stole something for ourselves. I stole provisions from them and passed them to children in the city through my cousin Tosia. Sometimes I went into the city. Liuba also knew the address, and she brought stolen provisions to children.

On 11 December 1941 Liuba was betrayed by a denunciation. She fled at dawn on 12 December. By this time I had brought my two-year-old son to stay with me in the kitchen because in Kyiv children of mixed marriages were being executed. I kidnapped my son or rather I sent a girl by the name of Natasha Grineva (she is still living with me) to kidnap my son and bring him to me.

Then I was betrayed. I sat confined in my room for a month and a half. The bosses had left, and I was alone in the flat with the child. I took Natasha in, and we lived together. Getting out of there was impossible because I was living on the second floor and down on the first floor there were policemen who were guarding me.

Doctors who were working at the plant wanted to help me because I had saved them. The plant manager, chief of the plant, did not like Russians. They had to wear the letter R and were often mocked. The two doctors were Russians who had escaped from a German camp. I forged documents for them, wrote that they were Ukrainians and found jobs at the plant for them.

Out of gratitude they told the Gestapo men and policemen who came for me that I could not be taken in for questioning because I had had a severe heart attack and I was possibly not a Jew because that could not be proven and my papers were in order.

They left me for a time in my room, but I lay there, surrounded by medicine, trembling whenever I heard rustling or footsteps.

On 23 February 1942, which was Red Army Day, the Gestapo finally came to take me away. It was at dawn, about seven in the morning. Natasha had left for the plant. We had arranged that if I was taken away I would leave the child with her and she would take him to her husband in Kyiv.

The police had not arrived yet. They came at about eight o'clock. I saw the Gestapo men jump out of their vehicles and head straight for me through the front door. Slipping galoshes on my bare feet and throwing on only a light jacket, I ran to the attic (this was the third floor; no one else lived there). My son was still sleeping. I was afraid that if I picked up the child, he would cry out and we would both die. I did not take him with me. I thought that the Gestapo men would see that I was not at home and would leave. But they waited, evidently thinking that I had gone somewhere nearby because the child was still sleeping and I would come back soon.

I took off my galoshes and barefoot cautiously went down to the street. I ran to another house and only there put on my galoshes and set off at a run to the forest.

I sat there for a long time until I saw the Gestapo vehicle leave. I was afraid to go back and went in the direction of Kyiv. I tore up my shirt and wrapped the strips around my feet in place of stockings.

When I reached the Darnytsia bridge, I was asked to show a pass. But the doctors at the plant had written a warrant to the effect that I was being sent to hospital for treatment. I showed the pass. They accepted it and even put me on a vehicle that was passing by and took me to Kyiv.

In Kyiv I arranged a meeting with my husband through my cousin Tosia. He gave me his over-shoes, felt boots and sheepskin and took me to stay with my present co-worker, the actress Popova. I lived with her for ten days, constantly waiting for my son to be brought to me.

I had to go away from there because raids were being conducted all around. They were going to flats, searching for people without residence permits, and dispatching them to Germany. Thus I began to wander. I spent two nights with a woman pianist. During the day I walked about the city outskirts, and at night I would go to the pianist with whom I had worked before the war at our theatre. I went to stay with a few acquaintances whom I could trust. But this was all only for one night.

In the end everyone began to avoid me. I had nowhere to go. I had no clothes or money. I began spending nights in cellars, attics and ruins. I would stand through the night in lavatories. Thus it went on until May. I still could not find out anything about my son or where he was and decided to leave, but I became very ill and was picked up in the street and taken to hospital.

I learned at this time that my husband Pronichev had been arrested. I could not find out anything about him until 1945. In 1945 a pianist who had worked with us before the war came back from Germany. She had seen Pronichev at heavy labour after he was arrested. She would bring him something to smoke and eat. When she came one day, she was told, "Don't bring anything more. He's no longer here." The Gestapo had arrested him. She tried coming one more time, but was told that he had been executed. She could not prove that this was true, but no one ever heard anything more about him.

I was taken to hospital precisely when the residents of Slobidka were being evacuated to Kyiv. The evacuation was carried out by the Germans because partisans had been discovered in the vicinity of Slobidka.

When I came out from hospital, I went to Shuliavka. I knew the places where he had been, and I thought that I would find him there. But someone pointed me out. A group of people who had been rounded up or arrested was being led by, and I was pushed in with them and taken away.

We were taken to the Lukianivka prison, where I spent twenty-eight days. I was badly beaten. A policeman by the name of Mitia who was working there often gave me a slice of bread or cigarettes when he was on duty. And then, when I was taken to my last interrogation and was almost half-dead and beaten, he carried me away. We found ourselves across from the Kalinin hospital, near Shuliavka. Before that he had beaten a German with a rifle butt, and that was why he took me away.

Near the Kalinin hospital he put me down and said, "I can't go far with you. I have to hurry. I'm a partisan, not a policeman. My name is Mitia."

He kissed me and disappeared.

And so, ill, beaten, covered in scars, I set off on foot for Bila Tserkva. It took me many days to get there. Along the way, before I reached Vasyli'kiv, I was given torn sandals which I wore until autumn. One of the Kyiv theatres was working in Bila Tserkva, but I did not find the names of any acquaintances and I therefore boldly went into the theatre and offered my services. But because I looked terrible I said that I had been evacuated from Slobidka (this was known everywhere), and I was accepted. The costumer recognized me because we had been getting costumes from her since 1926, but fortunately she did not know my nationality. She knew my husband well, but he was a Russian. She took me to her place to spend the night. I had to undress when it was time to go to bed and was wearing only a jacket. She gave me a blouse. I

worked there for a month or a month and a half. Then the theatre left for Kyiv, and I could not go to Kyiv.

A translator was needed in Rokytno, forty kilometres past Bila Tserkva, and since I had learned German by this time (I had learned it from dictionaries) I took the risk and went there. I worked there for two weeks. My translations proved to be wrong. There were suspicions that I was a Jew and I was persecuted, and I fled from there back to Bila Tserkva. When I arrived there, I found a second Kyiv theatre, which was known as the Regional Shevchenko Theatre. My old friend Nikolai Tsygankov was there. He pretended not to know me. During the day I was at work, and in the evenings he and his wife would have me come over and would feed me. I got a place with their theatre. Soon the actress Kol'tsova appeared. We had worked together back in 1934, and she had betrayed me.

When the actors in the theatre began persecuting me, Afanas'ev, the theatre's scene-shifter, announced that if anyone offended me he would deal with him. He took me under his wing because shortly before I arrived his Jewish wife had been executed before his eyes and his three-month-old child had been killed.

I had to run from village to village and town to town many times. Afanas'ev always gave me advance warning.

In the summer of 1943 the Shevchenko Theatre and I arrived in Ruzhyn. There was a Jewish ghetto in it with thirty-eight Jews. They all worked in the tailor's workshop. They were registered, and a policeman came by every day to determine whether everyone was present. There was no opportunity to bring them anything. They were cautioned that if one of them disappeared everyone would be shot. They were working without pay for the entire region.

As an actress, I presented a demand to the commandant. I deliberately tore my skirt because I wanted to talk with them. I went to the commandant and told him that my skirt was torn. I had to appear in public that evening, and the skirt had to be mended. He gave me permission to have them mend the skirt. I pretended that I was going to the market-place, took a basket with

me and assembled some provisions—bread and money—covered them with my skirt and went in. Afanas'ev was standing outside, talking with a policeman and inviting him to the theatre. I went in at this moment. I shook everyone's hand, which touched them deeply and made them cry because except for slaps in the face they had never heard a kind word. When I gave them the provisions, all the men and women wept. My skirt was ready for me by evening.

Several days later the Gebietskommissar arrived from Koziatyn and ordered that all the Jews, except for the three best craftsmen, be executed. They were all taken away before our eyes and immediately executed, which we all saw.

Then the theatre moved to Koziatyn. I was working at the theatre in whatever position I could get: actress, administrator or cashier. I conferred in German, which Prikhnenko, our director, ordered me to do. I begged him not to send me to confer with the Germans because I might accidentally say something wrong and be immediately shot. But he said to me, "Remember your past."

My past consisted of being born in a Jewish family, which he knew about.

This is how I suffered until the arrival of the Red Army on 28 December 1943. Under bombardment I made my way to Kyiv. My only thought was to learn something about my children. In Kyiv I was immediately told that my daughter had been sent to an orphanage, but I could not find out anything about my son.

I went about all the orphanages, went everywhere I could. Later I was told that the children who had been at the place where my daughter was had been executed.

A little bit later some children were brought from western Ukraine. I went there as well, looked them over, but did not find my own. I walked about the city like a madwoman and looked into the face of every homeless person.

Children were brought to Solom'ianka on 12 March 1944. I went there. When I asked for Lidochka Pronicheva, a little girl was brought out whom I recognized as my daughter. At first she ran towards me, but then she stopped. Her father had told her that if she met her mother

she should say “Aunt,” because otherwise we could all be shot. At first she ran towards me, but then she stopped and said “Aunt.” But when I said “Little daughter, now you can say mum,” she ran to me, wrapped her arms around my neck and shouted, “Mummy.” This was a moving reunion. Everyone was crying. I could not take my daughter immediately. Several days later, after visiting every orphanage, I found my son.

Afanas’ev, with whom I had become close, left for the front. I was left alone, naked and barefoot. I sewed a coat for myself from a blanket and went about in it. Taking my children to live with me was very difficult because I myself was starving. They met me half-way and my children stayed at the orphanage, where they are still living.

Afanas’ev came back from the front as a second-category Patriotic War disabled person. I am working at the Kyiv Republican Puppet Theatre as the lead actress.

[signature] (Pronicheva)

[signature] (Vil’kova)

Translated by Marco Carynnyk