

Leonid Kotliar



This is a photo of me in an ostarbeiter camp in Germany. Stuttgart, spring 1944.

I was in hiding on an occupied territory in Ukraine till the autumn 1942. I went to work in the kolkhoz. Kolkhozes functioned. They kept threshing grain. Once my room mistress said: 'There is an order to send you to Germany'. A day later we boarded a freight train in Peremyshl and went across Poland. Few days later we arrived in Germany. We arrived in Nurnberg. From Nurnberg a train took us to a transit camp in Bittingen stuffed with prisoners. We went through another

sanitary treatment and then they began to count us like they would count cattle. We, a group of 300 people, were taken to Stuttgart on 15 December and were put in Sleutwitz camp in a small forest. There were long barracks for Slavic ostarbeiters. On the morning of 16 December we went to work from the camp. I was taken to a joiner shop.

This was a radiator plant. We received robes with the sign 'OST' painted with white paint on the chest. If somebody wanted to wear different clothes they had to sew on this sign. We got up at 6 in the morning. Our working day lasted 12 hours and on Saturday we worked 5 hours. Sunday was a day off, but we were often taken to do various jobs on this day. We were given a loaf of bread for four of us every day.

At first we were in a common camp Sleutwitz and our camp fuehrer was Meier, a cruel bandit. He always wore an SS uniform and he started fights. There were guards with Alsation dogs in the camp. In the first two years we were paid 8 [Deutsch] mark per month and then they began to pay 16 [Deutsch] mark. Occasionally we managed to leave the camp to go to town, but then we had to hide our 'OST' badges to not be caught by the police. When we were lucky we could buy some bread or a pack of forshmak from rusty herring. A Polish man came to take photographs. He charged little for his services and I had two photographs made for me.

The feeling that I was working for Germany oppressed me and I was looking for an opportunity to do some harm. Twice I placed small nuts in the exhaust pipe and the ventilator blade broke. Both times the shop was closed for two days.

In early 1944 the air forces of allies struck and destructive blow on Stuttgart. We greeted the beginning of 1945 with confidence that the victory was close. Soon we got to know from the French that the ally troops occupied Strasburg. The town was preparing to defense and street fighting. Soon we were locked in the camp. On the morning of 18 April the gate was wide open and there were no guards left. American planes were flying low above the roofs during the day. At night on 19 April we fell asleep before the dawn of our Liberation. In the morning the wind of freedom blew us beyond the camp wire fence. There were American troops moving along the streets on trucks. There were German prisoners in them. In the camp we took bread from food stocks and the French prisoners guarding a refrigerator gave us pork. Somebody brought a bottle of alcohol. We feasted in the camp for ten days.

Officially we were liberated by the first French army supported by American troops and there was French administration. Radio station 'Freedom' announced that on 8 May at 23 hours in Berlin the act of unconditional capitulation was to be signed in Berlin. Soon Moscow confirmed the announcement of European radios. Volley firing blasted the quietude in the town: the Harrison of Stuttgart made grandiose fireworks in honor of victory over Germany. I didn't even try to hold back my tears on this night of victory. my tears on this night of victory.