

Rahmil Shmushkevich With Political Officer Ovitsenov



Our political officer Ovitsenov and I, Rahmil Shmushkevich, on the front line, few days before the Kharkov front line forces encirclement and my captivity. Photo made by a correspondent of the "Stalinets" newspaper in the Izyum town in May 1942. In an hour after this photo was taken a shell hit our political officer Ovitsenov killing him.

On 22 June 1941 I was in Moscow. I took a 3 months training course for Party officials at the Lenin Academy. I stayed with my friend, a very popular Soviet poet Evgeniy Dolmatovskiy . He received a phone call early in the morning about the beginning of the war.

On the 2nd day of the war I was senior instructor of the division political department at the Southwestern front. I was on the battlefield in various divisions and armies. I went to Western Ukraine and the locals told me about ghettos and mass shootings of the Jews. Besides, all Jewish men between 15 to 50 years of age were recruited to the army and perished having no military training or weapons. Millions of people perished in that way including Jews. I was involved in the defense of Kiev. I was in the city in September 1941 and saw my grandfather Haim (my father's father) for the last time. We reached Kharkov where I got another assignment to the "Stalinets" newspaper in division 47. This newspaper was one of the best newspapers of the front line in the Soviet Union. I was editor of this newspaper and editor of the military intelligence unit. Our editorial office was located in the town of Izyum near Kharkov.

In 1942 our military units were encircled. Commander of our division shot himself. I believed that I would manage to get out of this encirclement knowing the locality, but I didn't. There was a horrible battle. I was wounded and lay in a ravine among dead bodies for 12 days. I ate wormwood and looked for breadcrumbs in the pockets of my dead comrades. When I climbed out of there I saw a Hungarian military. I pointed my gun at him but it didn't shoot because it had dampened. The Hungarian grabbed my belt tying it round my neck and began to pull me along the field. I was captured. All captives were taken to a huge camp for prisoners-of-war in Smela (a town in Cherkassy region) on a truck. A German soldier and an interpreter walked among the captives putting down their names. I gave them the name of Nekhoda, my best friend and a Ukrainian poet Ivan Nekhoda. I cursed in Ukrainian and gave them the name of the village where my friend was

born as my place of birth. I only made one mistake telling them that I was stealing from the collective farm - Germans didn't like thieves. Later I was telling them that I came from the family of kulaks and that I never liked the Soviet power. I grew a moustache like a Ukrainian kozak. Nobody knew that I was a Jew.

The staff of our field hospital was captured, but they didn't betray me to Germans. Our nurses hid me among those that died from dysentery and in 3 days they took me to the barrack for the prisoners that had dysentery. No officials ever entered this barrack.

Later we were put on the train and traveled for a long time until we arrived Bolhonne, a small town in Lorraine, France. We were taken to the Shtalag 12F, a camp for prisoners-of-war. At the end of September 1942 I went to work at the gas engine plant and met some French that were very nice to us. They always bought us some food. One other man and I decided to try to escape. The French brought us some clothing and documents. Our escape failed and Germans captured us. We were interrogated and tortured, didn't get any food or water for 5 days and were thrown into a stone pit. It was 10 degrees below zero but we survived. I always remembered that Germans might find out that I was a Jew and I kept thinking about an option of being shot instantly to avoid any torturing. In February 1943 I worked at the stone quarry near Saarbrücken in Western Germany. I became a member of an underground organization. We established contacts with German anti-fascists and French resistance. We began to receive some information about the situation at the front and it helped us a lot.

There were boxes with medications in the medical facility of the camp. I could read the names of medications and pretended that I knew what they were for. Nobody else in the camp knew anything about medicine and Germans believed that I was a medical professional and appointed me as a nurse. I kept stealing medications transferring them to the underground unit to help inmates that were ill. This lasted from the end of 1943 until 1945.

We, about 300 prisoners-of-war got free on 18 March 1945 and went to the Alps mountains. We had weapons and I became commander of battalion of former inmates of the camp. American units were moving in the Eastern direction and we met with them in Trier, Germany. (Editor's note: where Karl Marx was born). We were all so happy about our victory. Americans treated us very nicely and arranged a reception in our honor. There was commission for repatriation of Soviet citizens and the USSR Embassy in Paris. I got in touch with Paris requesting instruction my conduct in Trier and with Americans. I was summoned to the Soviet Embassy in Paris. In Paris I met quite a few participants of French Resistance. I met a communist writer Elsa Triolet and her husband Louis Aragon. I also met Marcel Cachin who was the editor of the "L'Humanité" newspaper. On the eve of 1 May 1945 Charles de Gaulle, President of France, arranged a military parade and invited two Soviet battalions: one of them was the one under my commandment. The Communist Party of France awarded a medal with Stalin's portrait to me. This was a special award for Soviet prisoners-of-war. I was also awarded a medal "de la Légion d'Honneur".