

Anatoli Kraemer With His Friends



That's me during the meeting of veterans of Great Patriotic War in Velikiye Luki. We went there to the Monument to the Unknown Soldier on the 50th anniversary of the Velikiye Luki battle. Unfortunately, time doesn't spare anyone, there were very few of us left. I'm standing in the 1st row, 1st to the left, by the monument. The photograph was taken in 1993.

In 1942 I found out about Estonian corps being formed in Ural, I went to the military enlistment office with the request to join the lines as a volunteer. I was 17 and I was assigned to the Estonian corps.

Our Estonian corps was sent to Velikiye Luki. The town was captured by Germans, and the Soviet army encircled it. Velikiye Luki battle started. Our corps was in the lines. There were fierce battles. There were a lot of casualties from both sides. Finally, we ousted fascists from the town.

Then we were sent to Leningrad. When besieged Leningrad was liberated, our Estonian corps were sent farther, in the direction of Estonia. We were happy to take part in the liberation of Estonia. We went on to liberate Estonia from fascists. Our corps took part in Tartu liberation. Then we liberated Tallinn. Our tank column was the first to enter Tallinn. But my regiment passed by Tallinn and went to the island. There was Klooga camp on our way and it was the first time I saw what fascists had done on our land. There were fierce battles. I was wounded at peninsula Sorve in the combat with the Germans and was sent to hospital in Tallinn by Finnish ship. When I was discharged from the hospital, our corps were sent to liberate Kurland. There were a lot of casualties.

On 9 May 1945 we were supposed to attack German positions... On the eve of the battle, I went to bed earlier in the dug-out. Suddenly I heard the shots thinking that the battle was on. I ran out and saw our soldiers shooting from the guns, pistols and crying out that the war was over. It was the night of 8/9 May, the last shots of war. I hugged the tree and burst into tears. Estonian corps marched to Tallinn from Kurland, passing Riga. Anywhere we were walking the road was strewn with flowers. We were welcomed as the winners, rescuers.

I am chairman of the Council of War Veterans in our community. Every year on 22nd September we celebrated the liberation of Tallinn from the fascists. All of us, veterans of the Estonian corps, go to the Monument to the Unknown Soldier on that day. I also go there with a feeling of pride as I was also among the liberators of Tallinn. And now, young guys, who even read books, cannot imagine what war is like, and are telling me that I am an occupant, not the liberator. What is my fault? What was I supposed to do? Reach Narva and stop saying that I am not willing to go liberate Estonia for the Soviet Union? What were we to do, especially the Jews, the soldiers of the Estonian corps, who were aware of fascists exterminating Jews in concentration camps in Estonia? What were we, the army, supposed to do? Should we have said, 'we are not going to Estonia, let it be liberated by the Russians?'

I do not think that such an attitude is correct. We are not the occupants. We did not think of ourselves, when we were fighting fascists. For example, so many of our guys died in Velikiye Luki. When we, the veterans of the Estonian corps, decided to collect money for a monument dedicated to them, nobody wanted to give us money. Finally, the left party helped. On jubilee dates we go to Velikiye Luki to meet with other war veterans who took part in that battle. We commemorate those who perished there. This should be kept in our memories. Veterans should be respected. It is an utter disrespect to our own history, when we, the elderly people, the veterans, on the day of the liberation of the city have to beseech somebody to give us a bus to go to Tallinn cemetery, where thousands of our guys are buried, and to bring them flowers. And not to mention the trip to Kurland...