

Minna Svoiskaya



This is my sister Minna Svoiskaya. This is an amateur photo. Minna was in Ostrov after escaping from the Nevel ghetto, she is 16 years old here. Beside her (part of the photo is cut off) were her friends, members of the Ostrov underground organization.

On 6th September the Germans eliminated the Nevel ghetto. At first they took away all men, most of them were old men, and my father and brother were among them. They were made to dig out three huge pits. Then all of them were shot. After that all women and children were taken away and children were pulled away from their mothers. Everyone was undressed and shot.

When the first burst was fired and they could hear the bullets whining, Mother pushed Minya into the pit and jumped into it too. Dead bodies began to fall on them from above. The Germans did not fill up the pits, they just left. At night Mother managed to get out from under the corpses and crawled out of the grave. She tried to find Minya, called her by the name, but it was useless. My

grandma Rakhil also remained in that pit. Mother found a man's coat, put it on and went to Pustoshka.

Several days passed. The number of Germans increased around Pustoshka. Yurinov told us that he could not continue hiding us, as it was too dangerous. He gave us clothes, food and we left for Pskov. On the way to Pskov we created a legend about ourselves. Rosa and I had blue eyes and did not look like typical Jews. We invented a name and a story for us: we passed ourselves off for the Suvorov family, from Leningrad, who had spent the summer at our grandma's place in Minsk, got under bombing and lost our documents. Mother, who had a typical Jewish appearance, pretended to be a stranger, whom we met on our way to Pskov.

We came to Ostrov. Rosa and I settled with a Russian woman separately from Mother in order not to arouse suspicions, though there was no ghetto in the town so far, and Jews walked along the streets freely. We had a happy encounter here: we found our Minya. She also managed to get out of the grave and a German gave her a lift to Ostrov: her Russian appearance helped her. Minya also invented a legend for herself; she had already obtained an 'Ausweis' [a new passport] by that time and found a job. Later on Rosa and I also obtained documents at the commandant's office. We washed German clothes and got bread and soap for this work. We helped our landlady in her vegetable garden and our mother, a wonderful knitter, traveled around villages and knitted cardigans.

Later on we got acquainted with Ostrov underground movement members, the leader of which was Klava Nazarova. Klava promised to take us to the guerillas. In spring of 1942 Shura Kozlovsky, a guerilla messenger, led one of the underground members, Yeva Khaikina and two Red Army men, who escaped from prison, to the guerilla camp. They were ambushed on their way to the camp. Shura and Yeva perished and those, who were taken prisoners, gave away those members of the underground party, whom they knew. Klava Nazarova was hanged.

We continued to seek contact with guerillas. Mother was first to get there. She was knitting a cardigan for a woman, whose husband was a guerilla messenger. He transferred Mother to the troop. Soon we also managed to join the guerillas. We were interrogated in the troop by Special Department Head, Pyatkin. He was trying to find out if we were German spies. We managed to persuade him that it was not true.

We were in different troops. Rosa worked as an interpreter at the headquarters, I worked as a nurse and Minya was a shooter. Soon Mother was sent by plane to the hinterland near Valday. She was accompanying the wounded. We were also offered to join her, but we refused flatly. Mother later got over to Kazan, where her brother Isaih evacuated from Leningrad. We continued to wage war.

Our life at the guerilla troop was very difficult. We were almost starving, lived in earth-houses and moved from one site to another constantly. In May 1943 Germans encircled our troop. We tried to break the siege and lost Minya during the battle. After the combat a boy came running from Klimov's troop, where Minya served. He told us that she had been wounded in the leg and the Germans had seized her together with other wounded guerillas and had thrown them into a cellar. The boy was also among them, but he managed to escape. Andreyev, our troop commander, told us that we would not be able to rescue them from the Germans. Minya perished.