

Iosif Gotlib With His Colleagues



This is me, Iosif Gotlib (sitting in the 2nd row first from right) with members of a locomotive crew of column #28. We had just returned from a trip. The trip ended well and the crew returned in full complement. We are taking a rest after the trip. This photo was taken in Nida (Byelorussia) in 1944.

In 1939 I passed all exams and obtained a certificate of qualification to work as assistant locomotive operator of freight and passenger trains. I took my first trip in June 1940. Since then I worked as assistant locomotive operator and I earned well.

At 6 o'clock in the morning of 22 June 1941 I was to take a trip to Germany as an assistant locomotive operator. I came to the depot at 5 o'clock in the morning to obtain documents and do the final inspection of the locomotive before departure. I was surprised that there were no lights in the depot and there were many people in military uniforms on the platform. At about 10 o'clock one of militaries announced that Germany attacked the Soviet Union without an announcement and that we were at war.

Few days we learned to shoot and crawl and studied service regulations. Then we were distributed to military units. I joined an intelligence unit as an interpreter, my major duty was to interpret interrogation of German captives. The regiment was deployed near Moscow. This was September 1941. There were no actions near Moscow and we moved to Byelorussia. I went scouting with the unit several times.

I didn't stay long at the front. In January 1942 I was wounded in my arm and head. Our regiment medical unit provided first aid and then sent me to a rear hospital in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, in 2500 km from home, where I stayed for almost two months. When I was released from hospital I went to a military registry office to request them to send me back to my unit. The military commandant looked at my documents and said that there was a railroad crew formed in Karaganda and that he was sending me there. There were 3 columns formed and I joined the 28th locomotive column.

We hauled people, tanks and planes - anything. As a rule our destination points were near the frontline so that people or equipment could reach it promptly. There were frequent air raids. Almost in every trip there were losses of staff: crewmembers were wounded or killed. We looked death in the eyes every day. Of course, it was scaring, but not at work. During the shift I was calm and concentrated.

In March 1945 we already began to drive trains in the direction of Germany. In late April 1945 our train was running in the vicinity of Berlin, about 30 km. We were near Berlin on Victory Day. Everybody was happy that this terrible war was over. People greeted and hugged one another. There were fireworks in the evening and orchestras playing in squares and streets. My wife and I were looking forward to demobilization, but we were told that our column was staying in Germany. We transported the military, military shipments and food. Only in October 1945 our column returned to Nida in Byelorussia. Only 19 of 300 who were initially in our column survived.