

Kofman Raikhchin During The Victory Day Celebration



This photograph was taken on May 9, 2005 in Saint Petersburg (May 9 is the Victory Day in Russia: National holiday to commemorate the defeat of Nazi Germany and also to honor the Soviets who died during the war.) That day we had our photo taken together with a complete stranger (he was a front-line soldier, like me). Now it would be a good thing to tell you how the war began.

In June, 1941 my brother and I finished the 10th class. On June 22, 1941 (Sunday) at noon I heard some noise in the street. We had no radio at home, but our neighbors heard Molotov's speech and ran out of their houses. By the way, early in the morning on June 22 many citizens heard drone of airplanes and bursts of bombs, but everybody thought it was military exercise.

Next day we together with all our classmates went to the local military registration and enlistment office. [Military registration and enlistment offices in the USSR and in Russia are special institutions that implement call-up plans.] They enlisted almost every boy, except me: I was the youngest (only 17 years old). My brother Paltiel was among the called up boys.

I joined the Komsomol Battalion. Its task was to go round the neighboring villages and ask peasants, whether they noticed enemy spies. I was given a nearly blind horse and a rifle that dated back to the time of civil war. I did not manage to find a spy.

Day by day the front line approached our town. There appeared first victims: people occupied in building protective constructions around the town, were shot from planes.

Soon the town started preparing for evacuation. One of officials of high rank in our town was our relative: his surname was Zaretsky. He convinced Jews to evacuate. But my father refused flatly, he told everybody that when he was in captivity during the World War I, the owner of the farm where he worked was very good to him. Many Jews of Petrikov also considered life under Germans to be much better in compare with Soviet regime. I guess that many Jews were saved thanks to the following circumstance: after occupation of Poland [on September 1, 1939 Germany invaded

Poland] through our territory there passed many Jews forced to leave their native places. From their stories it became clear that times had changed completely and that Jews would not expect anything good in case of German occupation. Therefore many Jews of Petrikov started preparing for evacuation. My father had a good reason not to leave: he considered himself standing sentinel, because products from his food warehouse were delivered to neighboring woods for partisan groups.

On July 5 the first barge with evacuating people left (among them there were communist party workers with their families and plenty of luggage). Early in the morning on July 19 Zaretsky came to our house on horseback. He talked to my father in Yiddish:

- Velvl, leave immediately, save your children.
- I cannot do it, I keep the keys from warehouse.
- Give me the keys and make all ready for leaving. In half an hour I'll send a lorry to you.

So we moved to the station. That was the way I went by train for the first time in my life.

Later we got to know that about 400 Jews remained in our town. All of them were executed by shooting by Germans.

Our way was long and painful, but at last we found ourselves in Samarkand area, in some kishlak. [Kishlak is a rural settlement in Central Asia.]

My father started working as a shepherd, my sister got fixed in a job of a bookkeeper, and I already told you about my brother Isaac. As for me, I started working at the anti-malaria station. I was obliged to go round the local residents and distribute anti-malaria medicine. I also had to spray oil over the surface of water reservoirs to destroy malarial gnat-worms. I guess I managed my task, because during my work there were almost no cases of malaria. The malicious irony of fate was hidden in the fact that when I already was at the front line (in 1943), my father got ill with malaria and died.

Once on my way a batman-rider found me and handed over a call-up paper from the local military registration and enlistment office. It happened in August 1942.