

EHRI Online Course in Holocaust Studies

Volyn', September 21, 1941, 3

The Holocaust in Ukraine – Auxiliary Administration and Police

Translation: *C01 A young member of the "Polissian Sich" police force in Volhynia about his shooting of Jews, 21 September 1941*

Interview with "Mishka"

A Fifteen-Year-Old Insurgent from the Polisian Sich

A group of tanned and bearded young men gets out of a lorry. They are instructors from the Polisian Sich who after long and obstinate battles with Bolshevik bands have arrived for rest. They have brought an exotic attraction with them, a gift from the jungles of Polissia, a young boy who is dressed in a military uniform that is too big for him and who is standing with the trouser cuffs rolled up. The sleeves conceal his hands, and the angry eyes of a resident of the Polissia region are barely visible under a huge *budyonovka*.

Mishka is dissatisfied. He does not listen to anyone except Lieutenant Yurko. He is angry because he was torn away from his native Polissia. He doesn't want to talk to anyone, pretends that he's very busy and busies himself beside the lorry, twisting off various parts and then twisting them on again.

Efforts to talk with him would have failed if it weren't for the intervention of "almighty" Lieutenant Yurko. The order was short and clear: "Mishka! From now on you have to listen to this man."

Mishka cast an angry look, spat to the side and sat down across from me. Everything about him said, "Well, now what? I'm listening."

"Who are you?" I began the interview.

"Me? I'm Mishka Pavlenka. What, don't you know me?"

"What's your nationality?"

"Ukrainian."

"That's good! Where are your parents?"

"They were working at a collective farm. Father died because of his work. Mother... well, her legs swelled up, and she probably also died of hunger."

"How is it that you didn't die of hunger?"

"I was living near the military men. My sister cooked nettle, and that's how we survived."

"Tell me how the uprising in your parts began."

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“The uprising, you say. Our army... Oh yes! It began when the Bolsheviks were scaring everyone by saying that the Germans would come and gouge out eyes and cut off legs, and I escaped to the forest. I escaped with a horse, so that his eyes wouldn’t be gouged out, and then I started coming closer to the town, to Olevs’k, because there was nothing to eat. The horse had something, but for me it was worse... Then we saw that Germans were going about, dressed like us, and they weren’t stabbing anyone in the eye, and they were speaking our language, and so I went home. Later I learned that they weren’t Germans and that it was our army that defeated that commune.”

“But how did you get to the insurgents?”

“How? They knew that I had lost my parents and only had a horse, so they took me with them to the army. And even before then Nastia had taken up with Jews.”

“Who is Nastia?”

“My sister. The stupid thing thought that the Bolsheviks were telling the truth about the Germans and escaped with them.”

“Weren’t you afraid to join the insurgents?”

“Why should I have been afraid? I did everything that they demanded. I went everywhere, and I fought, and I shot Jews who had tormented me at one time. But our own people almost did me in. It was in Barbarovtsi because I didn’t want to give them my horse. They raised such a ruckus. A Bolshevik or Communist said, “Shoot him!” But Yurko wouldn’t let them. He stood there and shouted at them, “I vouch for him! He’ll stay with me!” (Yurko is an insurgent officer, son of Diachenko, the colonel of the Black Zaporozhians, who shows that his ancestral blood is alive in him, that he couldn’t wait patiently for his regular army to arrive, and joined the Polisian Sich.) “We should have been afraid, so Yurko and I were the first.”

“When the bandits attacked us in Sobiechyns’ki Budky they hit two men with dum-dum bullets, but the rest were all right. But later, when they began shooting with a machine-gun, I jumped on my horse and rode off to get help from the colonel. The first six kilometres were all right, but then two men jumped out of the woods and began shooting. I inserted a pin in a grenade, thinking that if they shot me I’d blow the hell up and it would be all over. But I got there. I was all right, but the grenade blew one of the bandits to pieces.”

“Didn’t you regret having to kill people?”

“What are you saying, sir? Regret? If you didn’t shoot him, he’d kill you! You have to kill bandits. Yurko did that. He was very brave. He checked guard posts at night and himself caught two paratroopers... One was a Jew who tried to kill Yurko with a machine-gun. I crawled up from the side and gave him a bullet in the eye, so that he just cried out and died. I never left [Yurko’s] side. [Yurko] would go into battle, and I’d be with him. When he went into water, I was there. Being with the Polisian army was very good, and I was happy.”

“Are you pleased that you’ll be going to school in Rivne now?”

“Yes, but I’ll miss Yurko, and I’d like to fight more in order to destroy every one of those devils. The Sich gave the Otaman [Yurko] orders to go as far as Kyiv, and we still haven’t got there or destroyed the entire commune.”

The Otaman [Yurko] cannot fail to keep his promise.