

Children in World War II

Abstract

The history of WWII will be viewed through the diaries/memoirs of children from Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland and Germany. Working in mini-groups, the students will learn to read personal documents, ascertain particular aspects of the author's daily life, and compare everyday life in different countries. By creating a story about someone their own age, participating in discussion, and making comparisons with their own everyday lives, the students will be able to understand and feel the past. Working with children's diaries/memoirs will help them understand how war changed children's everyday lives.

Aim of the lesson

To learn how children's everyday lives changed during WWII.

Objectives

- 1 To reflect on the idea that war is not just heroic actions, but also a struggle for survival. It is a time when a person's life is changed, irrespective of their age, where they live, or their social status.
- 2 To feel like a researcher into everyday life.
- 3 To compare wartime everyday life in different countries: the USSR (Republics of Ukraine, Belarus, Russia), Poland, Germany.
- 4 To teach the students to search for information (using analytical skills, identifying key information, performing critical analysis) in a historical source, and to read a historical source.

Methods

Working with a source, creating a story, discussion, analysis and comparison, working with a map.

Equipment

Handouts (texts from 9 diaries/memoirs, questions), an OHP (desirable), devices with internet access, (students' mobile phones).

Authors of diaries / memoirs

Anatoly Listopadov Born in 1929, lived in Bakhmach, Chernigov Region, Ukraine SSR.

Ludmila Leblan Born in 1926, lived in Bezhitsa, Bryansk Region, Soviet Russia.

Victor Cherny Born in 1928, lived in the village of Mogilnoye, Borisovsky District, Minsk Region, Belarussian SSR.

Nikolai Borovsky Born in 1927 in the town of Ostroshitsky Gorodok, Minsk region, Belarussian SSR.

Ursula Brecht (née Lindemann) Born in 1928, from Cologne, Germany.

Gerda Altpeter (née Rappaport) Born in 1926, from Essen, a city in the Ruhr region and the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

Stanisław R. Born 1927, Wołkowysk county, Białystok voivodeship, Poland.

Teresa Sosnowska Lived on the far side of the river Bug, in Sokal, during the war between Poland and Germany.

Klaus Schlimm Born July 16, 1929 in Magdeburg, moved to Essen, Germany.



Preliminary homework

Review the history of WWII, as told in textbooks.

Agenda

Introduction	Group work	Presentation of group results	Discussion and conclusions
11 minutes	22 minutes	37 minutes	20 minutes

Lesson plan

Introduction

8 minutes

Introduction by the teacher.

The teacher refreshes the students' knowledge of the history of WWII.

- When did the war start for different countries (Germany, Poland, the USSR)?
- What were the opening hostilities?
- The teacher examines the progress of the front line on the map, and asks the students to name keynote hostilities.
- How long did the war last and when did it end?

The teacher presents the concept of everyday life. Everyday life is closely associated with the daily routine of recurring processes and events. In routinely performing the disciplines of daily life, an individual invests a certain meaning in each action. We can identify four basic components of everyday life: firstly, social disciplines: everyday or festive, political or work-oriented; secondly, the tools for performing those disciplines; thirdly, the space in which the individual performs the disciplines; fourthly, the meaning of those disciplines that helps one distinguish between the good and the bad¹. Example: history lessons twice a week. Tools: textbook, pen, notebook. Space: classroom in a school. Purpose: so that the pupil can learn about the past and be evaluated on his/her performance.

3 minutes

The teacher explains the task. Depending on the class size, the teacher divides the class into a maximum of 8 groups to prepare presentations about the lives of children during WWII.

¹ Leibovich O.L. The Three-Storey House, or How to Study the Everyday Life of the Late Stalinist Era. Readings from Astafiev: The time of The Merry Soldier: Values of Post-war Society and their Understanding in Modern Russia: Material from the 2009 Perm scientific conference, pp. 250–274.



Part 1

Group work

22 minutes Students work in groups with the diaries/memoirs. They prepare a talk about the child who wrote the diary/memoir.

Part 2

Presentation of group results

37 minutes Each group takes it in turn to present one of the children (each group has 4 minutes). The presentation consists of answers to questions (see below) about the daily life of the child in question.

Working with a child's diary/memoir and biography in a group involves:

- 1 Working with the document, highlighting passages related to the questions with a marker pen, and making notes in the margins.
- 2 Working with the map: marking where the child lived at the beginning of the war, and their movements during the war.
- 3 Drawing up a description of the city / town / village where the child lived (from the internet)

Questions:

- 1 What is the name of the child, and how old was he/she at the beginning of the war?
- 2 Where did the child live before the war—in a city, town, or village? Which country? Find the village/town/city on the map (you can use your own devices). Find a description of the place on the internet: is the place big or small? What was it known for (industry, agriculture)?
- 3 How far was the place from the front line?
- 4 How did the child learn about the beginning of the war?
- 5 What changed in the child's life after the war began?
- 6 What did the child do during the war? How did he/she help his/her family or friends?
- 7 What problems did he/she have?
- 8 What part of his/her pre-war life remained unchanged during the war?
- 9 Find unknown, colloquial or specific words, and look them up on the internet.

Part 3

Discussion and conclusions

15 minutes Discussion. The teacher moderates the discussion by asking questions and clarifying details.

Questions for the discussion:

- What differences were there between the children's everyday lives before and during the war?
- What differences were there between the daily lives in different countries?
- When did the child have to make a difficult choice? Why couldn't he/she have acted differently?
- Why do children write about terrifying events in such a calm way?
- What impressed you most in the diaries/memoirs and why?

5 minutes Conclusions. A brief summary by the teacher.



Anatoly Listopadov

Born in 1929, lived in Bakhmach, Chernigov Region, Ukraine. Anatoly kept a diary while living in a region which was occupied by German troops.

1941

June 22

WAR. Molotov's speech at 12 noon. The alarm sounded in the middle of the speech. The militia broke up the bazaar. I was running around like a mad thing with the guys. In the evening we began to dig trench shelters. Instructors are going round making everyone dig. The women are angry, saying, 'We're digging our own graves. Better to sit inside when the bombs are falling.' Anna Konstantinovna was crying. There were two alarms during the night. Petro Samostiyanovich says that a lot of people will die in this war. I can't believe that.

June 23

Messengers on horses from the recruitment office spent the whole night bringing call-ups to the Red Army. The alarm went off at night. The radio said, 'Citizens, formations of German bombers are moving towards Bakhmach.' Three times they said it. It scared us. There were several alarms during the day. And every time, the medic girls in trousers rush like mad things to their collection points. Wonderful! Petro Samostiyanovich says, 'Why are you running around like mad things? They'll only have to drop one bomb and you'll drop your pants straight down.' The women get angry and talk back at him. There are a lot of apples this year. We swim, sunbathe and generally we're enjoying our holidays to the full. A lot of planes are starting to fly. Our team is working flat out.

July 3

Today we listened to Stalin's speech. The kindergarten workers were crying. A lot of refugees are arriving. The air raid sirens keep going off. It makes us laugh to see the refugees running around during an alarm. We laugh, and they tell us we haven't been bombed yet, that's why we're laughing.

July 14

I'm going to remember today. At 4 p.m. there was an air raid on Bakhmach. It lasted 2 hours and 40 minutes. Now that was something scary! I was on my way from the library. Was half way home when planes appeared over the city. Then the noise started! I was thrown through the air towards the fence, and fell right into the mud. We've had a bit of rain recently. I lay there, my heart ready to jump out of my chest with fright. They were buzzing overhead, machine guns chattering, bullets whistling. They flew over the city and turned to come back. I got up, hoping to God I still had my legs. I flew into the kindergarten. They'd cooked food for the children. The plates were on the tables under the apple trees. Suddenly that infernal noise again! Plates came flying off the tables. At least one made a smooth descent and smashed into pieces. I jumped into a half-dug shelter trench and lay down on the bottom. I looked around, and the place was full of nurses and those medic girls. Petro Samostiyanovich was not wrong: looked like they'd forgotten to put on their overalls. One was lying there, her fingers stuck in her ears, her mouth open from ear to ear. So as not to go deaf. Eyes like a sheep being whipped along. If it hadn't been so scary I would have laughed fit to bust. Then the bombs began to explode right close by. The air was burning hot. I crawled through the potatoes to a covered shelter and waited there until the end of the bombing. The walls were shaking. Sand was pouring from the ceiling. The pressure in the air was suffocating us. When we got out, it was as dark as evening. Smoke was covering the sun. Hay depot was on fire. At



Kievsky railway station, shells, bombs and bullets were firing off in ranks. Pillars of fire were rising up into the sky from the gasoline tanks. The dead were being taken to the garden of the doctor's surgery. A car would pull up, a body be dumped onto the pile, straw thrown over it, and off they'd go to fetch the next ones. The wounded were also being collected. A lot of people had been badly hurt. Nobody had known how to hide. They'd all rushed out of work and run home to their children. And the fascists—beasts!—came in low and peppered them at will with machine gun fire. There were a lot of people in the shelter, and I was sitting in a shape like an arch, back against one wall, legs on the other. Yesterday our team had been called together and a plan had been made, but the wretched bombing raid scattered us to the four winds.

July 29

I was in town. The three of us were sitting in the cherry trees when the bombs began to whistle. The Germans arrived without us even hearing them. We dropped out of the trees and lay still. What a noise in the yard! The owner came hopping out of the house, saw us - and gave chase. Zhenya and I jumped over the fence, but Taras caught his trouser leg. She got him, of course—smacked him in the back with a stick. He pulled away and tore his trouser leg up to the waist. We ran to the swamp, and finally had a good laugh there. The Germans dropped four bombs. Two exploded, but two didn't. The only casualties were two boars.

People are gradually returning to the town. Our team is beginning to break up; people are leaving. There are 19 of us left and we're working flat out. It's scary in town but fun as well. I sleep in town, in the kindergarten, with Peter Samostiyanovich, and sometimes the guys drop in. There are lots of apples, but no one to pick them for.

August 10

It's quiet in town. I haven't been to the town for several days. We've been haymaking. It's good in the field! We went mushrooming in the forest. There's a battalion in the village. We're often with them. It is fun with the Red Army!

September 4

There are lots of Red Army soldiers in the village. The collective farm property is being distributed to the collective farmers. The mistress brought home chickens, honey, and apples, and drove in a hefty pig. I now live with the fighters almost all the time. And eat there.

September 7

I took the mistress's cow to pasture. I took a whole hatful of plums with me. Troops are moving along the road from Baturin, and they're bringing tanks and cannon. You can see smoke over Baturin and hear explosions. They'd started setting up their cannon at the edge of the village. We went up to the gunners. They gave us buckwheat, and we gave them plums, apples and pears. Great guys! There are a lot of troops in the village; they've crammed all the gardens with hardware. Towards evening, two Heinkels flew by. They flew over the village, sprayed the place with their guns, and flew off. We sat in a ditch.

September 10

The Germans are mining the streets. They're dragging ploughs, harrows, and carts to build barricades. At ten o'clock they began shelling the city. We went to the old apartment and then couldn't get back. The Germans had mined the street. Four cars pulled up by the mistress in the yard. The Germans began to catch the chickens. They took away the milk. A garland of onions was hanging there, and they peeled them all for the pot. They shook all the pears off the trees. Prowled around like wolves. The mistress nearly got herself killed for trying to stop them damaging the fruit trees.

October 26 Today the Germans stole a frying pan from us. The railway is not working. They've forced people to repair the bridge. A labor exchange has been organized. All people between the age of 14 and 60 have to register with it under the threat of being shot. I'm not going to register even after I've turned 14. Everyone who's registered has to work for the Germans for half a month, and the other half month they're free. For this they're given 3 kg of barley a month. Valery Kirichenko's father runs the exchange. We had a fight with Valery. He calls us partisans and we call him a German flunky. He says, 'I'll tell Dad,' and we thump him for saying it. His father complained to Anna Konstantinovna, and she gave me a little tongue-lashing. Well, that's okay. The Germans have thrown all the residents out of the government houses and are now living in them themselves.

November 26 Our food supply is bad. There's nothing to eat. Anna Konstantinovna exchanges clothes for food. Fuel isn't good either, but I swapped a crowbar for something. The Germans say they're already fighting in Moscow. They're lying, the dogs! The bazaars are all closed. During the night someone fired three shots at the Magyar officer and two soldiers. It's a pity they missed the dogs. In reprisal, they took out 50 of our residents and shot them.

1942

January 13 Today, when I was fetching coal, I was caught by a 'crazy' gendarme. He took me to the gendarmerie, and they beat me hard. I only just got away alive. We've begun to steal coal from the trains and sell it—100 rubles for a few kilos. I've got a few pennies, and it's helping us fight off the hunger. If we get caught, they'll shoot us. Ah well. Ivan Matveyevich was summoned to work at the station. He only just got out of it. Pretended to be sick. He makes graters at home, and I sell them. Makes them from cans—there are loads of cans at the station.

January 18 Today I turned 14. I'm supposed to sign on at the labor exchange, but I'm not going to. What will be will be. I have absolutely no desire to mend the road for them.

April 2 We'll start planting potatoes soon. The Germans have said each cow has to produce 800 liters of milk a year. They often raid the bazaars. They make out they're catching a thief but what they're really doing is stealing. They take milk, butter, bacon, eggs, etc. Today, a German forced me to carry his stuff from Central to Gomel. I refused, but he began to beat me, so I had to.

October 10 I've had to start work. I work as a messenger in the district health department. Not for the Germans, so that's one good thing anyway. There's a German prison outside the windows. Gestapo in the garden. The trenches we dug to hide from the bombs are filled with people they've shot. On the 2nd, early in the morning, the Fritz herded some partisans in their underwear into the last trench and threw a bomb into it. It didn't do for everyone; the survivors rushed in every direction and scattered around the city. They began to hide in sheds, cellars, and basically wherever they could. The Germans scoured the city for two hours and finished off on the spot anyone they found. There was shouting all over the town, and shooting; we could hear it even at our station. Of course, not everyone was killed, and it seems that many were saved.

1944

- January 7** I got a call from my mama, but they won't give me a pass. We've set up a mutual shop. It has everything. Small things - pencils, pens, needles, etc. The military is given things without having to make an investment. I go in military uniform, and they give me stuff like I'm a military man. State prices.
- February 24** I've already been living in Arzamas with my mother for nine days. We live on Volodarsky Street, but we're thinking of moving. It's too crowded in this apartment. I don't know anyone and I'm not working anywhere yet. I walk alone around the town and look at everything. The town is old and there used to be lots of churches. Mama says 36. The town is boring and I don't much like it. I don't know what will happen next. I went to the cinema. There are still frosts here. The landlady doesn't understand what I'm saying very well, and I don't understand her. The results are wonderful.
- March 24** I went to join the Railway Department No. 5. Was accepted. I start on April 1st. The snow is starting to melt. In the evening I went to the cinema with Zhenya.
- I just can't get used to the fact that it's peaceful here. True, there are lots of planes in the sky, and out of habit I look up to see whose they are.

1945

- May 9** An extraordinary day. Today at 4 a.m. it was broadcast on the radio that the Germans have signed the act of surrender. THE END OF THE WAR.

Lyudmila Leblan

Born on May 4, 1926, lived in Bezhitsa, Bryansk Region, Soviet Russia.

Lyudmila was born in the city of Bezhitsa on May 4, 1926 into the family of Viktor Alekseyevich and Maria Petrovna Leblan. Her father was a builder, and her mother a teacher. They lived modestly with their grandmother in an old wooden house at the end of Saratov Street. Lyudmila did well at school. After the war she graduated with honors from the institute. For a long time she worked at the Bryansk Automobile Plant, in charge of the laboratory.

She started keeping her wartime diary on June 22, 1941, and made her last entry on January 4, 1949.

At the beginning of the war, Lyudmila Leblan was 15 years old. Bezhitsa was liberated on September 17, 1943.

1941

June 22

4 a.m. War has been declared.

Quite unexpectedly, today, or rather just now, at night, Dad arrived from Lithuania. I was overjoyed; his arrival was a deliverance, because when he arrived my tears dried up. Before then, tears had been my companions every day.

Bad mood all the time. Made worse by the fact that everyone is depressed, and wherever you look you see tears, tears everywhere.

I am very upset that no one in my family understands how things really are. They're seeing things completely wrong. Either I really don't appreciate the full horror of war, or my mother's nerves are simply in a dreadful state. I find it really hard, seeing her cry at the slightest thing, good or bad.

November 12

(11 a.m.). I've committed a terrible crime—I've broken the crown of my wristwatch. In peacetime it wouldn't be a crime at all, but now ... Where am I going to find a watch mender now? And the watch would have been useful; I could maybe have exchanged it for bread.

1942

January 26

... People in the city are really hungry now. They go round the villages trying to find something edible.

April 19

Spring has finally come into its own. We thought there'd be no floods this year, or they'd be smaller than usual, but the water came pouring in the same as always—the water wasn't interested in acknowledging that there was a war on. The sun is absolutely baking, the birds are singing, the water's like a mirror. It's so lovely to sit in the sunshine, tearing yourself away from gloomy thoughts of war and losing yourself in nature!

Source: L. V. Leblan, War Diary //
Recollections of the war in Bezhitsa:
collection compiled by T.M. Maidanova,
edited and with a preface by A.M.
Dubrovskiy, Bryansk, 2016, pp. 202-208.
\\ <https://prozhito.org/person/3912>



June 15 Since the 5th I've been working as a weighmaster. It's a bit more fun at work. Now there's almost nothing to do at work. We've had no Germans here the whole time, but today a cook-house was set up, and soldiers have been placed in the empty houses. No one's been billeted on us yet.

1943

April 28 Today is my last day working at the bazaar with all my wonderful companions. From tomorrow I'm moving to the passport department. I guess I'll be working as a secretary. Finally, some sort of office job has turned up. Have I hit lucky? I don't know yet.

May 5 Yesterday I turned 17. Re-reading what I've written, I think: what a big difference between last year and this. Last year I had so much free time I didn't know what to do with it all, and that was actually quite hard. This year I don't notice how time flies. True, S. is helping me. I even get angry with him sometimes. But my anger goes away as quickly as it comes. It's impossible to get really angry with him - such a simple, sweet boy. I don't know what will happen; so far nothing. Today we had an important talk, and we ended up thinking the complete opposite to each other. Perhaps he'll think about it and see it my way?

July 27 I can hear the cannon thundering. People have been evacuated from Oryol, and are arriving here.

[Everyone] seemed to forget themselves somewhat when the front moved away. We still had occasional bombing raids—at one time they were actually pretty frequent. But no matter how terrible the bombing raids are, when you think about the front, that was even more terrible. Well, we saw enough emotion in 1941, maybe—God have mercy!—this year we won't have to see that again.

August 6 Bombs falling for the third night in a row. Where is father now? We don't know anything, not even whether he's dead or alive. Or how soon the war will end. We've grown sickeningly used to it; life is not remotely interesting: living is just existing, and it makes no difference whether you die now or a little later. It's just a pity that this is how I'm passing the golden years of my youth. There are people who are still having fun, but what fun can there be when so much blood is being shed? In my opinion, having fun now is a crime. How hardened and callous have people become that they don't feel this, but just say, 'War? Who cares!'

August 18 Our men have gone to work outside Bryansk. Germans were posted to us yesterday. We have a captain with a batman and a chauffeur.

August 31 Last Sunday I was in the park. I'd gone to the cinema, but the equipment had already been taken away, and we decided to spend the evening in the park. There was a concert, but no one listened to a single note; we spent the whole time talking to one another. The most curious visitors were the soldiers. There was no one from the intelligentsia in the park, just people from the suburbs. None of the girls had ordinary hairstyles, they were all curls, lipstick and makeup.



This morning the Germans came with the evacuees. They're digging trenches across the whole garden. All the fences in our district have been taken down. They're dismantling our fence right now, and pulling up the raspberries.

There are various rumors going round the city, each one different. Nothing anyone says or does makes anything any clearer.

September 11 What we most feared has happened. It wasn't even 6 o'clock in the morning when the gendarme came and ordered us to be ready in five minutes. They drove us all out, including the sick. They ordered us to go to the Desna.

This is a truly massive exodus. People are walking, and riding in wheelbarrows, buggies, and carts. Goats, calves, and foals are harnessed to the wretched carts. Some people are riding cows; just a few are on horses. The Germans are driving us the whole time, setting the cramped neighborhoods on fire to make sure people don't stay behind.

Our journey was interrupted for the first time on Krakhtovskaya Street, when the handle on one side of our cart broke off. We tied it up and moved on. After that we had to fix the cart a couple more times. At first we were riding with our neighbors and lodgers, and then they began to lag behind with all their junk, and in the end we lost all our travelling companions.

When we'd passed the crossroads in the town, we wanted to stop for the night. We stayed there for two hours, and then [the Germans] drove [us] on even though it was night. We went a bit further and then we and two other families left the road a short distance and stopped for the night. We boiled potatoes, then fetched straw and went to sleep in the open air for the first time on our journey. The weather is still dry, the moon is shining, and the cannons are shaking the ground. All night until dawn there was a battle over towards Bryansk and Chaikovich. Towards morning, the glow was lower in the sky, nearer the horizon, and the cannon fell quiet. There was a sharp frost, and it was pretty cold at dawn. This is how we spent the first night of our journey.

September 17 Afternoon. Our journey is over ...

Victor Cherny

Born in 1928, lived in the village of Mogilnoye,
Borisovsky District, Minsk Region, Belarussian SSR.

Before the war

Life was hard. We had no parents. In 1941, the Germans shot my father. We had no mother. Three of us lived together. I only did four years at school. I was 12 years old.

War

We were left on our own. We were children. Just children. I was not at home that day. The Germans had long been persecuting the Jews by that time. Maria came to our house in the fall of 1941 with her little girl. Her two boys had been shot in Borisov. Well. Maria hid in the forest. They told us, 'We are refugees from Smolensk and we've been robbed of everything.' All they had was what they stood up in, nothing else. They had nothing else. They came and said, 'We'll live with you.' My sister said, 'OK.' So I came home—I'd been at work. (I ploughed our land—the Germans had given us six hectares of land during the war because we were orphans. Some people took ten each, some eight. We didn't need that much. Six was a lot for us.) Well. I came home, and my sister said, 'We've got a guest.' Well, I thought, we'll live. It is what it is. We were orphans, Maria was an adult, she was born in 1909, she was already an old woman. Her girl was small and didn't know our language. She might have been four, maybe more. She could walk, though, the way all little children walk. My sister did two years at school before the war. They were small, well, they walked straightaway.

I didn't sleep in the house during the war. I was up in the hayloft. I made myself a kind of nest there. Well. I slept there, and the old woman acted like she was deaf. People began to bring things to her so she could knit them sweaters, socks, gloves. Well, they said, a refugee, a Smolensk refugee. We all took her for a refugee from Smolensk.

After the war

We lived to see the Great Victory. After the little girl got married, they went to Israel. They went away and were welcomed there. The old woman Maria didn't want to go, but the children told her, 'We need you.' Because they'd already had their own children. So they needed a nanny. So Maria went to Israel. She told them she'd come from Belarus, and that Belarus had been occupied during the war, and they began to talk about my sisters and me. My sister then said to me, 'Vitya, come to the museum, we'll get a reward.' I didn't understand, I was saying, Who? What? She said, 'We saved Jews, they'll give us a reward.' (In 1997, Viktor Cherny was awarded the honorary title 'Righteous Among the Nations').



Nikolai Borovsky

Born in 1927 in the town of Ostroshitsky Gorodok, Minsk region, Belarusian SSR.

Pre-war life

Nikolai's father died while Nikolai was still young, and the boy grew up independent and hardworking. He felt sorry for his mother, and helped her in every way he could. Before the war, Nikolai completed six years at the Ostroshitsky Gorodok secondary school.

War

The war began. The day before the Germans arrived, the Deputy Head Kirill Ivanovich Shestakov told the teachers, Komsomol members and Pioneers from the school to go that very night and bury the most valuable school property in the garden: equipment, manuals, books. The next morning the Germans occupied the school and took out all the remaining textbooks, maps, books, and documents, threw them into the flower bed, and set fire to them. This hideous bonfire provoked much anger. The school was closed, and the commandant's office was set up in it.

An underground school organization was quickly formed, and immediately began to operate. Almost all the members of the literary and dramatic circle became members of the underground, including Kolya Borovsky. Although the teenager was the youngest of them all, he was artful and brave, and carried out any assignment very well and responsibly. Physically strong, Nikolai was an excellent swimmer and a fast runner, and could slip right past a soldier without making a sound. Kolya became an indispensable collector of information. He got a job as a shepherd's assistant and then as a road builder, and in that way found out what was going on in Ostroshitsky Gorodok and passed it on to the underground. The Ostroshitsky Gorodok school underground was extremely useful to the partisans, collecting vital information, and sending medicines, clothes, and food into the forest. Kolya Borovsky and his teenage comrades collected and hid weapons to hand over to the partisans, and distributed leaflets. Nikolai fulfilled many important assignments, risking his own life more than once, showing endurance and resourcefulness.

Once, with two older comrades who worked as drivers in the road department, Kolya Borovsky hijacked an armoured German car and took it straight into the forest. This was how he became a partisan, serving in the Voroshilov unit of the Frunze brigade. Nikolai began a new military life; he went on missions, including taking part in vandalizing the German garrison. Borovsky was highly thought of in the unit: he was a brave and reliable reconnaissance agent.

In the summer of 1943, disaster struck. L.N. Shestakova recalls: 'Somewhere near the village of Beloruchi, Kolya was captured by the Germans. They beat Kolya severely and for a long time, trying to find out where the unit was stationed. Kolya said nothing. They brought him to Ostroshitsky Gorodok and beat him again, trying to find out the names of members of the partisan unit. But Kolya still said nothing. They took him, exhausted and beaten, out of the shed and hung a board round his neck with the inscription "I am a bandit". Wire was twisted round his hands and a bell attached to it. Apparently, this was the same bell that he sometimes rang when he was on duty at school, calling the children to class. Kolya was led by the Germans and policemen around the town. The bell rang pitifully whenever he fell down under the blows of a heavy fist or boot.' Eyewitnesses said that the inhabitants of the town cried, seeing how they were torturing the little partisan, and his mother, distraught with grief, rushed about the courtyard of her house. Kolya did not cry and did not beg for mercy; he endured everything calmly and with dignity.

Sources: *The Leonid Levin Minsk Historical Workshop electronic witness archive, Minsk, Belarus <http://zeitzeugenarchiv.gwminsk.com/ru/archiv/wettbewerb-2017/borovskiy-nikolay>

*Remembrance: Historical documentary chronicle of Minsk district, Minsk, БелЭН [BelEn], 1998.

*O. I. Simonova, *We Shall Live*, 2nd Edition, Minsk, Belarus, 1971.

*A. N. Stifutkin, T. N. Tit (née Stifutkina) [relatives of N. Borovskij], Trostenetskaya Secondary School Archive.

*I. K. Churko, [teacher at the Ostroshitsky Gorodok secondary school], *Memoirs*, Archive of the Ostroshitsky Gorodok Museum of Military Glory.

*L. N. Shestakova, [teacher at the Ostroshitsky Gorodok secondary school], *Memoirs*, Archive of the Ostroshitsky Gorodok Museum of Military Glory.



The beaten teenager was taken to Minsk, to prison, and from there to the Maly Trostenets death camp. Nikolai Borovsky died without betraying anyone.

On June 6, 1944, eight underground Komsomol members from Ostroshitsky Gorodok, comrades of Kolya Borovsky (Nina Stosuy, Lyuba Vrubeľ, Tonya Stefanovich, Lyuba Makeichik, Galya Prokofieva, Vera Khatkovskaya, Raya Svetlova, and Arkadiy Kruchenok) were arrested and later burned in the Maly Trostenets death camp, along with one of the leaders of the underground, Kolya's favorite teacher Kirill Ivanovich Shestakov.

After the war

The residents of Ostroshitsky Gorodok honored the memory of the underground heroes by erecting a monument (in the park opposite the former school building) to the teachers, students and residents of Gorodok who died during the Second World War.



1944

**October 15,
24.00**

I'm working a night shift. Each family member is required to keep watch for two hours at night in case there's an air raid. The alarm is no longer sounded and we don't want to be caught off guard. There was a raid again this morning. I was peeling potatoes in Fort # 8 for people wounded in air raids, when I heard the familiar, terrible roar of engines, and immediately after that the noise of carpet bombing. We were trembling for two hours. The bombing was really heavy again. There's no basement in the fort, and we were squatting in the corridor, huddled against the wall. It's impossible to think while it's going on - all feelings are so dulled that you become almost indifferent to the danger. After each raid you think, 'This time it worked out, but how long will our luck last?' You don't even think about what will happen tomorrow; maybe tomorrow there'll be nothing left of anything. After today's raid, I hurried home on my bicycle. Our house had survived, but everything around was on fire. The Mühlheim bridge had collapsed and is now lying in the water. The Rodenkirchen bridge was badly damaged and is unusable. Now the rain's pouring down. What's it like now for those who are left homeless? No, don't think about that; that could be us tomorrow. After lunch, Dodo and I drove to the factories in Frechen [author's note: a city in North Rhine-Westphalia]. I always go with him so that he's not alone on such dangerous trips. I'm the only one who can escort him—there's no one else left, and besides, I'm practically a soldier myself – I sometimes feel like one, when there's shooting from all sides and I'm going to get bread and food on my bicycle. I grit my teeth and think, 'Come on, Ursula, you need to get through this. Soldiers don't give up either!' Six months ago, I couldn't have imagined this. There's the roar of the engines; I must wake the others.

October 26

I'd just set off with a trolley full of clothes to rinse them at the pump in Rodenkirchen [author's note: in the Cologne area], when I had to go back without having done it. The shelling started up so fierce that I forgot about being brave and simply raced home. The smoke screen's up now, and I can hear the planes.

Terrible things have been happening in Cologne lately. There's talk of robbery, murder and assault. It's not safe outside. I can't understand how people can take advantage of times like these to do such things.

It's been terribly quiet at the front the last few days. Yesterday we received news from the local party group that my cousin Karl-August is missing. He was in Hertogenbosch [author's note: a city in the Netherlands]. Not a word from Gunther either. Nor my brothers. It's like post is no longer being delivered to Cologne. Everywhere people talk about the 'front-line city of Cologne'. If only the planes would leave us alone. There's no way just to be yourself. Maybe that's a good thing? I don't know.

Sources: The texts for publication were kindly provided by the organizers of the project site 'Youth in Germany: 1918-1945' <https://jugend1918-1945.de/portal/Jugend/zeitzeuge.aspx?root=27120&id=2712>.



October 27 Two letters arrived from Hans on October 2 and 13. Thank God, he's OK. We're all very happy and everything has immediately started to look so much better. We all hope that we in Cologne have now gone through the most difficult times. Attacking Cologne no longer makes sense. Everything here's already been destroyed. No transport is running, and in Wesseling [author's note: a city in North Rhine-Westphalia] nobody's been working for three weeks. We're more confident in the future now, and our hope has been rekindled. These are the activities my life consists of today: going to fetch water, hunting for bread, peeling potatoes in Fort # 8 - and sitting in the basement! I've left the factory and my work. Firstly, I can't get there now, secondly, the factory's been burned down, and thirdly, my parents simply wouldn't let me.

Today I sat down at the piano and began to play. I concentrated on my playing for two hours. I felt such happiness that we'd had letters from Hans that I wanted somehow to express it. I played the Romanze from Mozart's Piano Concerto in D minor.

And now I'm full of strength and joy, and I'm going to fetch water!

November 4 I've just returned from Bayenthal [author's note: in the Cologne area]. Again a complete waste. No bread, no meat, no vegetables, no water - nothing! For three days now I've been trying to get bread: useless. There are no shops left. The standpipe in Rodenkirchen's been bombed [author's note: Rodenkirchen is in the Cologne area]. I had to spend ages looking for water. I went to Bayenthal [author's note: in the Cologne area], Zolstok [author's note: in the Cologne area] - no water anywhere. Finally we got desperate and collected rainwater, but we'll have to use it sparingly. We are terribly dirty. Not that anybody takes any notice of that these days. Yesterday I discovered another source of water in the Tacitus bunker [author's note: air raid shelter]; you can get water once a day there with ration cards. Yes, water's become our most precious commodity these days. But we do feel a little more confident. For two days there have been no raids, and for two nights we've been able to sleep peacefully. That's done us so much good!! We're practically the only people living on Parkstrasse. All our friends and neighbors have fled Cologne. It's got really lonely here. And there are constant alarms and shooting at the front.

We heard that an ultimatum's been delivered to Cologne, and, of course, rejected. Ah, if only it had been accepted. I know that's not the way for a German to think, but now we're going to have to go through even more suffering. Cologne's going to be even more ruined, and so many people are going to die. No, no, how good it would be if it was over.

Cologne, 1944

November 27, evening We've just received a package with Klaus's last things, dated October 7th. We have a bad feeling about what this means and are prepared for the worst. If we could just have a clearer idea of what's happened to him! This not knowing is hard for everyone.

December 21, night Hans has come home! Three hours ago. He's been given leave until January 10, because he'd not heard anything from us for so long, and Cologne is almost in the front zone. What happiness, suddenly! What a wonderful Christmas we're going to have now!

1st day of Christmas I will never forget yesterday: what a Christmas Eve! We spent most of the evening in the bunker. Of course, there was another air raid. Our enemies are capable of such meanness! Between the bombings, I dashed out of the basement and turned on the radio, found the Cologne Reichskanal, and there was Max Bruch's violin concerto playing, as always on Christmas Eve. Then 'Silent Night, Holy Night'. The smell of burning was coming through the open doors, and shells were exploding outside. Silent night and death were so close to each other. It was inexplicable.

Today it's freezing cold but the planes have still been flying all day. But no matter what, Hansel is with us for Christmas, and the four of us are happy together.

December 31 I'm sitting in a bunker. This bunker and the other basements are basically what we've got now. Yesterday our house was bombed to the ground. It all started at 21:00. It was the scariest thing in the world. The bombs were falling really close, the bunker was shaking, the walls were swaying, dust was standing in a column, and we had to breathe through wet rags. We could hear incendiary bombs falling and exploding outside. The noise was hellish, and we thought we wouldn't get out alive. When the noise finally began to recede, we heard something fall from the house. Father scrambled out and started shouting, 'Fire, fire, everybody up here.' The second and third floors were already engulfed in flames. A real battle to save the stairs started. Dodo cut down the wooden banister with an ax, and we, like madmen, dragged hundred-kilogram sandbags upstairs from the basement and emptied them onto the stairs. Then water – we simply couldn't let the fire spread downwards. We thought the concrete floors downstairs would delay the fire. All our attention was focused on the stairs. Strangers who came to help pulled the furniture out of the living rooms. How lucky we were. Suddenly, the ceiling over the dining room collapsed - we did not have concrete floors; we were wrong! The fire was raging everywhere. We quickly carried our things out into the street and into the garden. The four of us lifted up the piano to carry it out through the window. Then everything collapsed. For a minute, I stopped in the garden and just watched. Such a sad thing. It was snowing but the house was on fire. I watched as the fire swallowed up bit after bit of my beloved home. I almost burst into tears, but then rage seized me, and all of us ran into the garden towards Teschendorf to get water from the reservoir. But there was nothing left to save. The fire had eaten its fill. Now we've started the battle for the basement, and we're not finished yet. If we could at least manage that. All our things are down there now. If they burn, we'll be beggars.

Gerda Altpeter (nee Rappaport)

Born in 1926, from Essen, a city in the Ruhr region and the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany.

Short biography

Gerda's father, Philip Rappaport, was a civil engineer and urban planner who was well-known outside Germany. He was the director of the Union of Mining Communities in the Ruhr Coal Region [author's note: a union engaged in the planning and construction of mining communities in the Ruhr Region]. This meant that Gerda and her three older brothers grew up in prosperous conditions.

In 1933, the carefree life of the family ended abruptly. Despite the fact that the Rappaports had converted to the Protestant faith back in the 1880s, the National Socialists considered Philip to be a Jew according to the criteria of their racial ideology. That meant that Philip's children were so-called 'Mischlings of the first degree'. A few months after the National Socialists came to power, Philip lost his job.

Wartime Memories

In the summer of 1942, Gerda and her youngest brother Werner-Karl prematurely stopped going to school. She was sixteen when the summer holidays started, and at that time there was no sign of trouble. 'Suddenly it turned out that new laws had been passed' - laws that prohibited the so-called 'mischlings' from attending school beyond the seventh year. Immediately after the end of the holidays, Gerda was summoned to the office of the deputy headmaster of the Maria Wechtler School. Like the headmaster, he was a committed National Socialist, but both of them respected Gerda, who was a good student. 'I'm terribly sorry,' the deputy head apologized. But could being sorry be expected to replace Gerda's school? 'For me it was a terrible blow. I tried to continue studying on my own.' But she now had to work, as part of her compulsory year's service, and that stopped her from concentrating on her studies. [...]

The plight of Gerda and her family was exacerbated by the increasingly frequent and ever heavier bombing of the industrial city of Essen. The Rappaports were not allowed to seek shelter in public bomb shelters, and during heavy bombing they had to hide in the basement of their house. Today Gerda Altpeter understands that the constant bombardment, lack of sleep at night, and the incessant threat to life 'drove her to despair' physically and mentally.

She did not notice that during the same period, the first deportations from the Rhineland to concentration camps and extermination camps in the east had begun. But over time, the threat became more acute, including to her own family. From 1941, her father had to wear the Star of David. 'He almost never went outside, except perhaps to worship, and then he hid it under his collar.' [...]

'Year's compulsory service' in Marl: 'They were very pleased with me'

After being expelled from school, Gerda had to do her so-called 'year's compulsory service'. The suggestion was that she should go to occupied Poland, but she declined. She reflected long and hard, and decided to take a job (offered to her by the Evangelical Church in Essen) in the family of a priest in Marl [author's note: a city in North Rhine-Westphalia]: 'I wanted to be closer to my family and do something really useful. I wanted to learn something and at the same time stay in a Christian environment.'

Source: The texts for publication were kindly provided by the organizers of the project site 'Youth in Germany: 1918-1945' <https://jugend1918-1945.de/portal/Jugend/zeitzeuge.aspx?root=1701&id=1701>.



Her decision to go to Marl turned out to be a good one. Gerda and her host family became close friends. The husband, an officer, was at the front, and Gerda helped the priest's wife and her five children: 'They were very pleased with me.' Gerda was given her own room, she was well fed, and every two weeks she was able to visit her parents in Essen, not far from Marl. [...]

'Too Good to Be True'

After completing her year's compulsory service, on October 1, 1943 Gerda was given a job at the Goldschmidt AG chemical plant in Essen. She worked as an assistant in a chemical laboratory, and participated in experiments in iron refining. This work was 'extremely interesting.' But by the end of 1943, the department had been evacuated from Essen, which was being bombed heavily, to Villach, in Austria.

Gerda declined an offer to go to Austria. Given the persecution her family was facing, she wanted to stay in a familiar place with familiar people. 'If there are going to be difficulties anywhere, it will be in Villach. You don't know anyone there. Nobody will help you. There'll be no one to rely on.'

She remained in Essen. [...] There, in July 1944, she heard that an attempt had been made on Hitler's life, and according to rumors, it had been successful. 'From the very beginning I did not have high hopes. It was too good to be true.' After a few hours without news, word arrived - Hitler was alive and the war was continuing.

Wartime evangelical youth work: 'Lord, you're already in danger: are you really doing this as well?'

Along with her job, in 1944 Gerda was still working actively in the evangelical church. Within the framework of the city mission, under the leadership of the vicar Anne Kaufmann, Gerda was recruited to raise funds for the clergy of the Confessing Church. She went from house to house in Essen asking for support for the opposition priests who had been expelled from the Regional Evangelical Church, which was collaborating with the regime. This was a dangerous activity, since Gerda herself was already being persecuted as a 'Jewish mischling', and here she was, speaking up for the Christian opposition. Her answer to the worried question 'Lord, you're already in danger: are you really doing this as well?' was, 'Yes, why not?'

A trip with the City Mission to Westerwald [author's note: a mountain range in Rhineland-Palatinate] in July 1944 gave Gerda a breather amidst the chaos of war. It was a 'holiday away from everything': from the dangers of air raids, from persecution for being a 'half-Jew', and her risky work in the Confessing Church.

However, the holidays were not entirely carefree either. The girls travelled to Westerwald separately; a large group would have attracted attention. And waiting for them in the mountains was not only fun, games, and serious work on biblical texts, but also specific preparation for illegal work in support of the Evangelical Church in Essen. The young people learned to construct arguments and to hold dialogues in support of the evangelical church.

Father's deportation: 'It was Sunday morning'

One Sunday morning in September 1944, as the Rappaport family was about to go to church, the telephone rang: 'This is the Gestapo. Get ready and come here.' Philip Rappaport and his wife set off on a dangerous journey. The Gestapo officer gave Philip a list of about a hundred people who were to be deported the following day. Philip's name was on it. He was to tell everyone else and come to the station the next day. [...]

Philip Rappaport [...] got ready for his forthcoming deportation. The family realized that his life was in great danger. But the eldest son helped him pack, saying 'Come on, let's pack your suitcase, that will help you survive.' In this way he tried to cheer up his father. Outside it was September and still as warm as summer, but they put warm clothes in the suitcase for the coming cold weather.

The next day, Gerda and her mother accompanied Philip Rappaport to the station. Many people had already gathered there, and the Gestapo and the SS were allocating them to the carriages. It was time for Gerda to go to work. It was hard to say goodbye. 'This could be goodbye forever. That's how we saw it.'

Escape from her own deportation: 'I should have been taken away'

One day, Gerda went to work and was sent straight to the head of Human Resources. He bluntly announced to the surprised girl: 'You are sick! Go to your doctor.' Although she was not sick, Gerda did as she was told. The doctor said the same thing: 'Yes, you are sick.' He gave Gerda a certificate saying she was sick with something she had never heard of, and sent her to a sanatorium. Only much later did Gerda find out what had happened. Her doctor often spent his evenings drinking with members of the Gestapo, from whom he heard that Gerda was in imminent danger. He told his friend, the head of Human Resources, who, in turn, warned Gerda.

Thanks to the help of both men, she managed to avoid deportation, and she and her mother set off to stay with relatives in the city of Bad Salzuflen. But as the railway service was interrupted during the war, they ended up in Hiddesen, with her uncle's family.

Her mother later returned to Essen on her own, and learned that the order for Gerda's deportation had indeed been sent to the house. But the housekeeper, without giving the matter a second's thought, had sent the letter back marked 'Gone away'. Gerda returned a few weeks later. The doctor who had warned her gave her the all-clear: the central headquarters of the Gestapo had been destroyed in a bombing raid, and all the documents had been destroyed. She was no longer in danger of being deported.

Stanisław R.
Born 1927, Wołkowysk county, Białystok voivodeship,
Poland.

The arrival of the Russians in Poland was both sad and joyful. For some Jews, Belarussians and Ukrainians it was joyful, but for the Poles it was unhappy and hard. The Bolsheviks called meetings of all the farmers and ordered them to vote on the taxes and to give up their cows, horses, pigs, chickens, and much else besides. Anyone who had a surplus had to give it away. For example, someone who had six cows had to give four to the army and the other two stayed on the farm. Anyone who didn't agree and refused to hand over his property had it taken from him by force and the farmer would be arrested or killed. Many Poles were sentenced to prison. On February 10, 1940, they started deporting our people; they were sent away to work, but no one knew where.

The journey was hard, and people did not have enough food or water. We were given no longer than 15 minutes in which to pack, and anyone going back would be beaten with rifle butts and threatened with death. We were allowed to take only what we stood up in plus 50 kilograms of food, together with bed linen and other things. During the journey we weren't allowed to leave the wagons. It was dark in there, and dirty, and it stank because they'd transported cattle in them before us.

Every three days they would give each person 100 grams of bread, a few drops of soup, and a small helping of oats. A lot of people became sick and died through lack of medical care. The journey lasted two weeks. We were taken to the Urals where we were given tiny apartments for two families. Everyone of 13 or over had to work; it was hard labor—they made us load wood onto trucks and cut peat by hand.

Father worked in a mine, and was hit by falling rocks. He was taken out of the mine on a trolley and went to the doctor, only to be told that his injuries were trivial. He was punished by the loss of 25% of his pay for 6 months. Four days later he was taken to hospital where he spent 14 days recovering from injuries to his head and back.

There were problems with food—it was hard to get. Each worker was given 600 grams of bread, and those who didn't work got 20 grams. Each worker got 500 grams of flour for 5 days and 500 grams of oats and 100 grams of lard, and those who didn't work got nothing.

None of us Poles were allowed to go to the market. Anyone who was caught was immediately put in prison. I was imprisoned for seven days for buying cabbage, potatoes, and a kilogram of bread at the market. I worked at sawing peat. The pay was low—between 100 and 200 rubles a month. Poles were called vile names just for being Poles and Catholics. They told us 'Your chances of seeing Poland and churches again are as high as me being able to see my own ear without a mirror.' They ridiculed and cursed God and religion for all they were worth. They wouldn't let letters and parcels from Poland through, and they abused us for all they were worth. After the amnesty they didn't abuse us as much as before, but they didn't want to pay us the money we'd earned.

Source: War Through Children's Eyes: The Soviet Occupation of Poland and the Deportations, 1939–1941 (Kindle Edition), by Jan T. Gross (Author), Irena Grudzin'ska-Gross (Editor), Bruno Bettelheim (Foreword), Ronald Strom (Translator), Dan Rivers (Translator)// https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07VJJTCPB/ref=nav_timeline_asin?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1.



In 1942 we were moved closer to the Persian border, but then they turned us in a completely different direction, to Kazakhstan to work on kolkhozes (collective farms), where they were short-handed. We were given a mud hut with no stove, doors, or windows. Life was hard there. When we wanted to fetch hay for bedding and fuel, they wouldn't let us use horses, so we had to carry it on our backs for two kilometers. After a month we got sick with enteric fever. We lay there in that mud hut without any medical or human care. Thieves came in and robbed us while we were ill, and nobody could look after us because we'd been sent a dozen or more kilometers away from our friends and relatives. Our neighbors (Kazakhs) didn't want to help us at all, except one woman, who brought us water, and hay to burn for fuel.

After I'd been ill for 16 days, I had to get up in spite of my illness and tiredness and go to work; I was the oldest in our family. Father and mother were very ill for two months, so I had to work hard to cover our living expenses and keep us clothed. I worked 12 hours at the kolkhoz without lunch, and at home after work I repaired shoes, trying to earn a slice of bread and something to wear—we were walking around in rags like beggars. My monthly earnings were 20 kilograms of flour, two kilograms of meat, half a kilogram of sugar, and 1 kilogram of salt. You only got sugar and salt if you worked well.

My experiences of the world war starting from 1 September 1939 to today, that is 8 June 1946

We were living on the other side of the Bug river, in Sokal, when the war between Poland and Germany broke out. When the war started, so did the bombing raids. Crowds of people on the run swept from west to east and they told us that the Germans were taking the men as they advanced. So dad took us into the country and went east himself, following the others, thinking that he would join the Polish ranks that were to be formed.

After a stay of a few weeks in the country, we returned to the town which had been taken by the Soviets. Mum saw what was happening and she was very worried about dad. She went out very distressed, and when she was gone our long-awaited dad came back. His feet were swollen and he was tired and appalled. Mum also came back soon after. After a long and heartfelt welcome, dad started to tell us about what he had been through and it filled us with dread.

After a few days of rest, dad changed his job and went to report to his place of work, but they were stingy in paying him. So we were poor at home, we only had pancakes made from grit and black coffee with sweetener.

When the wintertime came they started to move people to Siberia. We were ready to go too, sleeping in our day clothes and listening for the smallest suspect sounds. A year of that unease went by.

The next year, however, brought a new war between the Soviets and the Germans. It broke out on 22 June 1941. The first projectile from over the Bug river came down at 2 a.m., and that was the start of the war. We woke up and hid in the hallway. Since the door was ajar, we saw the neighboring houses and the trees in our garden burning. And we heard a terrifying banging and noise. That commotion lasted for an hour. After the first fire had passed, we scurried into the basement. When the front line was behind us and the Germans had taken the city, we were still poor even though dad was working.

One time dad went into the country and he came back quite late and so angry that he couldn't get a word out. He cooled down after a while and told us how the Ukrainians had taken him to a basement when, luckily, a German arrived. Having found that whatever they suspected of dad was untrue and impossible, he smacked the Ukrainian in the mouth and let dad go.

After some time, we went to Kamionka Strumiłowa, where we fared better. We stayed in Kamionka for two years. In that time, we received the terrible news of the murder of dad's cousin.

Next, we went to Lwów out of fear of the Ukrainians. It was just before Easter. Easter Monday came and we went to see my aunt. After we came home, we got ready for bed before the evening came. Some people were already asleep in the evening, but mum and I were sitting in the kitchen when we were suddenly deafened by an explosion. We all went to hide in the basement at once because the bombing had started. It lasted the whole night.

There were bombing raids every night after that, but they stopped for us on 13 May because we left Lwów for Łańcut, which was abandoned by the Germans six months after our arrival. The Soviet attack was effortless. The battle lasted a single night.

We were poor again. We left for Chełm where, just like in Łańcut, we were poor, and what's more we had to live in the basement. We scraped through a month like that. Next, we moved to Hrubieszów. Grandma came to us there with horrible news, that is, that grandpa had been arrested in Lwów and taken to Donbass. Finally, there was a moment of joy. Grandpa came back a year later. There were a few fires in Hrubieszów in that same year, and recently there was a raid.

Klaus Schlimm

Born July 16, 1929 in Magdeburg, moved to Essen, Germany.

In 1938 the Schlimm family moved to Essen, and Klaus's father Reinhold took a job in the Ruhr area as an agent promoting flame-resistant building materials. However, since this meant that he was working mainly with companies in the military sector, he was finally forced to become a party member, against his convictions.

As a child, Klaus did not personally know a single Jew. Later, he recalled seeing the windows of a store in Essen with its windows smashed. This was November 9, 1938; the store owners were Jews by the name of Rosenbaum. Back home he told his father, 'I could get you an iron.' His father begged him never to participate in such behaviour.

The beginning of the war

From the age of ten, Klaus had been preparing for war. He had participated in air raid drills, and learned what to do in the event of a fire.

On September 1, 1939, Klaus was with his uncle in Hunsrück; they were celebrating something. To Klaus, the transition from peace to war was very abrupt. Hitler was going from victory to victory. The boy was initially worried about the war. He put up a large map in his room, and with each victory he placed a flag on the map to mark every place his country had conquered. He rejoiced that more and more territories were becoming the 'Reich homeland.' The racist vocabulary of German propaganda influenced Klaus, and he found himself using it.

Even though the fighting was far away, the war was quickly and clearly felt in the everyday life of Essen. There were blackouts everywhere. The streetlights were switched off in the evenings, and even car and motorcycle headlights were covered, leaving just a narrow strip. Strict checks were carried out to ensure that windows were properly blacked out. If a window had not been properly blacked out, the air raid warden would shout, 'Put that light out!'

The first bombs fell on Essen as early as 1940, but Klaus Schlimm hardly noticed them. Although he heard the sirens and saw the red sky over the city center after the attacks, the bombing raids remained something that at first did not directly touch him. Often the residents of Essen would go out and watch what was happening in the sky. Klaus described the mortar fire as 'like a thunderstorm'. He did not realize that people were dying there at that moment. When a bomb hit the school, the pupils cheered, 'Hooray, the school's on fire!'

The Schlimm family had to endure many anxious hours, but they were lucky in that they suffered no physical or material damage, while many of their neighbors were badly hit. When one of his school friends was bombed, Klaus asked him, 'What should we do if the same thing happens to us?' His friend gave him suitable advice on how to behave 'in the event that you are bombed'.

'Over time, people developed a kind of stoic composure,' Klaus recalled. 'Even people who'd been injured in bomb blasts or had lost their homes.' Klaus himself, however, was spared this. Just occasionally he would dream that he was being carried into the basement, and in the morning he would wake up in surprise actually down there.



Evacuation of children from the city

As the air raids on Essen intensified, the evacuation of children from the city began.

In the spring of 1943, Klaus and his brother Henning packed their suitcases for evacuation. 'I cried terribly,' Klaus Schlimm recalled during his farewell on the platform. 'It was a real wartime farewell, and I was very upset.' But when the children began to sing in the compartment, he calmed down again.

Their destination was the town of Poděbrady in the Czech Republic, where Klaus immediately took a liking to the typical Czech architecture. 'We lived in a camp called "The White Cross", in a confiscated hotel. Numerous other school classes were there as well. Several thousand, if not tens of thousands of children.' Sometimes there were so many that you couldn't see any locals in the street.

'We felt a strange detachment.' Klaus and his friend went for walks of several kilometres around Poděbrady, admiring the views. The boys saw no danger, and walked around without a care, time and again running into locals, who were not very happy that they were there.

The food was very good. The hotel was run by Czechs, and of course the cuisine was Czech. 'The school was in a very modern school building which the Czechs had been told to leave.' Klaus Schlimm never found out where the local students were supposed to go. While he was there, only German students studied in the building. He remembers the classes as quite regimented, although religion and biology were no longer taught.

The atmosphere in Poděbrady was generally not bad, but the boys became fed up of the evacuation when it became obvious that it wasn't going to end after three months, as they'd been promised. They found themselves forced to stay. Their sojourn in a foreign country away from the family home kept being extended again and again.

As the war was coming to an end, Klaus found himself in a military training camp in the Bregenz forest, in Austria. The camp leader, 'another party man, a chap who'd been wounded in the war', told the boys that he had made arrangements with local farmers and businessmen to stay with them. When they went their separate ways the next day, Klaus and two other boys made their way to the local sawmill. 'But only two days after his arrival, French troops occupied the area.' Fifteen-year-old Klaus and his companions went through the occupation peacefully enough and mostly without fear. Their mood was good as they watched the victorious troops move in without hostile or aggressive attacks. None of the young men had any notion of the future. 'It was very peaceful for us. The weather was fine, the sun was shining, there was always something to eat.' Although at the beginning, the boys did have to keep going for two weeks on nothing but dry bread. But when the sawmill was closed on May 8, 1945, the day Germany officially surrendered, the boys were told, 'We have no more work for you'. The three lads headed into the mountains towards the Lechtal with rather mixed feelings, knowing that their school was in Lech. Klaus stayed in Lech for another three months, and spent the spring on a local mountain farm.

In July 1945, Klaus finally began his journey home. The journey was long and difficult; Klaus found himself frequently changing from one freight train to another. After six days, Klaus arrived safely in Essen on August 1, 1945.