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Das mehrsprachige Webportal publiziert fortlaufend Informationen zur historisch-politischen Bildung in Schulen, Gedenkstätten und anderen Einrichtungen zur Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts. Schwerpunkte bilden der Nationalsozialismus, der Zweite Weltkrieg sowie die Folgegeschichte in den Ländern Europas bis zu den politischen Umbrüchen 1989.

Dabei nimmt es Bildungsangebote in den Fokus, die einen Gegenwartsbezug der Geschichte herausstellen und bietet einen Erfahrungsaustausch über historisch-politische Bildung in Europa an.

Excerpts from an eyewitness interview

Anatolij Kuleschow

Born in the Brijansker area on May 5, 1920. Educated at the elementary school and at an agricultural college, degree not completed due to enlistment in December 1940. Redeployment to Sokulka in Western Belarus, training as a mortar-man; in March 1941 transfer to Wolkowysk, training as a tank crewman (not finished); after the war broke out in June 1941: withdrawal to Minsk, imprisonment, internments: Sluzk, Baranowitschi (camp no. 307); September/ October 1941: relocation to Hamburg (camp no. 310), transfer to the Buchenwald concentration camp; March 1942, transfer to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp; 1945 evacuation back to the Buchenwald concentration camp, then evacuation from the Buchenwald concentration camp, liberation by Soviet troops near Dresden; control through NKWD/SMERSCH, return to the USSR; since the fall of 1946 he has lived in Peterhof, a suburb of St. Petersburg.

[...]

What did you know about Germany and about what was happening there?

We did not have any clear idea about Germany, all we knew was that Hitler had come to power, that the country was arming itself... Nevertheless, a treaty had been signed with Germany... And we simply could not imagine that a war would break out.

What did you think of our country [the USSR] and its politics?

There was so much talk... People said that Stalin was very calm and he had signed the treaty with Germany. After all, we also exported grain to Germany. So it all came very unexpected -even though our intelligence had gathered information that they were preparing for war. We were even instructed not to give the appearance of wanting to defend ourselves or to engage in military acts against the Germans. That's how things were, although people told Stalin that Kiev had been bombarded, like many cities in Belarus. Despite this, our border troops fought valiantly... When the Germans invaded Poland, Hungary and other countries, also France,

they won in just a few days or weeks, but now they were facing resistance.

Did you ever hear about camps on Russian territory before the war?

No.

[...]

And how did you end up in captivity?

German soldiers sprang down from an armored vehicle, we fled from them by forming up a column and by running to a stockyard on the plain. Then we saw that there also stood a tank that turned its tower. German soldiers jumped out: "Hände hoch!" ("Hands up!") [In plain German, he laughs]. Soon columns of our comrades were brought to Minsk as war prisoners, it became a common sight... On the outskirts of Minsk a prisoner camp had been established, vehicles and machine guns had been deployed. Of course it was very hot in July, but they only gave us salted fish. In the surrounding area there was a small brook where people went when they were hungry and thirsty, but they were not allowed to go to the water, otherwise they were shot. From Minsk we were transferred to Baranowichi, where they put us into a prison building. No, from Minsk to Sluzk. There was a factory with a court, there we stayed some time and then they brought us to Baranowichi, to the prison by the railway line. From Baranowichi to... - I forgot - it was camp no. 307. It only consisted of cages made of barbed wire – put up under the open sky. I think it was near Biala Podlaska, but I can't remember exactly. It was under the open sky, well, and the food... Boiled potatoes, dirty and mixed with sand, and there were no cups - I used my field cap as a cup. About once every three to four days one scoop of this food was given out to each of us... We lived like cattle on the dirty floor, and when it rained... Then the diseases came, lice, dysentery... Many of us died. The dead bodies were thrown into pits. From camp no. 307 I was brought to camp no. 310 near Hamburg, which was in the forest as well. There were the same cages made of barbed wire. It was already October, or middle/end of September. With the food it was similar, one small loaf of bread per week for four people. Then the night frosts set in. Imagine how to sleep under such conditions, when the frost is coming, the cold... for we had nothing to wear. From camp no. 310 we were brought back on a transport and driven around for about a week. The wagons were totally packed, there was no place to lie down. We all had our skin torn up. They brought us to Weimar, in Weimar we were unloaded... Those who were too weak, they were... Often a draft of air was enough to make people pass out, and they were immediately shot. That's how it was also on the way, up the mountain to Buchenwald - whoever was too tired, was shot. We were totally exhausted... Those camps... The food... It felt like the end. There was a first prisoner transport to Buchenwald before us, mainly officers, I think. They were not brought to the camp itself, but to a particular building in Buchenwald, where they were shot. As for us, we were driven to the gate, there was a disinfection pit, we had to walk through it. Then they washed us and cut our hair.

Did you guess what was going to happen to you?

You know, it was so... We were in such a horrible state... Our lives were hanging by a thread! In such a moment it just becomes impossible to think... In

Buchenwald we were brought to the 13th block, which was divided into two parts.

Can you describe your first day in the concentration camp?

The first day? We were led into the barrack. After they cut our hair and washed us, we were sitting on the floor and were waiting for what would happen next. We got no food. Allegedly some political prisoners -in Buchenwald there were German communists - had given us some of their food ... Half of the space on the 13th block was in itself divided into two parts and there was only a wooden floor. In the other half there stood a small round iron stove. There the oldest prisoner of the barrack lived - the "*Blockälteste*" ("block elder"). His name was Fritz. In the camp there was a conflict between the political prisoners, the communists and other groups... Evangelists ... and all those others... There were so many different kinds of people, from everywhere and from all walks of life. Also outlaws were there, German criminals. They had received life sentences. None of them left the camps alive. How shall one describe this! Among the prisoners there also were saboteurs and outlaws. Well, this Fritz, a German, was one of those outlaws, he sat in because he was a criminal... They were called the Greens, and they wore green triangles. But they were different from the others, they had uniforms with shoulder patches and red breeches, they did not wear the striped prisoners uniforms. We wore our uniforms, our military uniforms. When other prisoners walked through the camp, we were unable to contact them from our barrack. We war prisoners were isolated from the others by barbed wire, we were unable to make contact with the people from other barracks. It was of a kind of quarantine. We were still too weak to work or go somewhere. Then they came in order to fill in questionnaires, there were clerks. We were under quarantine for two or three months. Then they sent us to work, too...

[...]

What happened during the day?

In the morning someone shouted: "*Aufstehen!*" ("Get up!"). We were driven from the barrack to the space in front, and there we had to line up, we were often waiting for for the SS officer for 1,5 to 2 hours. We had to wait for him, count off, and the *Blockführer* had to inform him on the number of people present. Then we had to learn a command by heart, which was: "*Mützen ab!*" ("Caps off!"). That order had to be executed right away. Otherwise you were punished. Then back into the barrack - all windows and doors were open because at that time of the day the cleaning was going on and we had to keep standing the whole time, regardless of the weather. When one wanted to warm up a bit, this was impossible... We just slept on the floor. We warmed each other up with our bodies. There were no blankets, no pillows, no mattresses. In the morning we received a cup of a kind of... well, a kind of coffee. A sweetish water, they had roasted acorns that were dissolved in it. There was nothing else, not even anything sweet, nothing at all. That was our breakfast. When they came with the big can, the stuff was already cool. Everybody finished their cup and then we went to work... For lunch, we had a scoop of turnip soup. Sometimes one was able to find a piece of turnip in it here and there. Well, and in the evening, they gave us small loafs of bread, one for every four people. About 100 to 150 g – that's what the food was like

in Buchenwald. Then, in March 1942, we were formed up as a column and brought to Sachsenhausen, to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin.

What moment was the worst for you in Buchenwald?

The worst moment was when we formed an "oven" in order to warm each other up. That is, we just imagined an oven. We moved close to each other and changed places from time to time. Who stood in the middle had to move to the edge -that's how we warmed each other. When I was standing outside, the block elder came from the other half of the barrack, he did not belong to our group. I was wearing a field cap, he saw it and he said: "Cap, cap! *Komm, komm!* (Come here, come!). Let's go for a swim!" There was the wash room and several of them took my clothes off and put them into the basin. That was in January, they spilled cold water over me. After that, I was lying there for a long while... If one of my comrades had not come in, discovered me and pulled me out of the basin with the help of other prisoners... I had already lost consciousness. If he had not been there, this comrade... Then they warmed me up with their bodies and I recovered consciousness. If they had not pulled me out, I would have laid on the hearse the next morning and they would have brought me to the crematorium. Another horrible experience was this: one day we were led back from work and we were only carrying our military shirts, although it was terribly cold; so I wore an extra piece of cloth in which I could wrap myself - soldiers used to have such a piece of cloth, a kind of scarf. I had put it around my head and had forgotten to take it down when we got back to the barrack. And again someone from the other part of the barrack, when he saw it, pulled at the cloth. Luckily, the scarf was not tied up - so it simply came off, otherwise he would have strangled me.

Was there any moment when you lost all hope of survival, and how did you get through that moment?

You know, everything had become so meaningless... All that mattered to us was only one thing - who had a piece of bread left... When we recalled how our mothers used to prepare the old potatoes for the pigs, we yearned to eat such potatoes ourselves. Only this one topic - food! ... We were unable to think of anything else! In March they brought us to Sachsenhausen [...]. I remember one day when a German "*Vorarbeiter*" ("foreman") was assigned to us - he was also a prisoner, and he was meant to instruct us. He felt pity for us and said: "*Langsam, langsam* (Slowly, slowly)... Stay calm." An SS officer passed and heard it - he dragged the foreman under a canopy and began to hit him with a stick. Then the man was taken away... There also was a "*Schuhfabrik*" ("shoe factory"). Inside, bags were opened, shoes were dismantled, many people were forced to work there, in particular Jews... Wooden shoe soles were made there, the leather was put somewhere else... But in particular, they were looking for things that were hidden. The heels were knocked off, the soles, the leather, the pockets were taken off. Gold was hidden in them, money, dollars. That's why they did all this. It happened at night inside the barracks. [...]

Were there any attempts to flee from the camp?

That was impossible. Later, towards the end of the war, we were brought back from Sachenhausen to Buchenwald... When a revolt broke out in Buchenwald, they evacuated the war prisoners first. The Germans brought us to a transport - we were driven around for a month. Then we had to get off and had to continue on foot. We were driven to a horse stable - the SS men were completely drunk. They were playing the harp, they were roaring, and they were singing their songs. But we were thinking that they would soon burn the horse stable and that would be the end of our story. But this did not happen, they pushed us further ahead... We came to a city, I can't remember its name... There was an open stretch of land where our group was stopped and they said to us: "Lie down on the ground, face down, and stay there!" We thought they were already preparing our execution. Well, we were lying there the whole night. And when we saw that it was dawning we were hesitating if we should get up or not. It was a terrible situation. Around us it was dawning, and we were beginning to realize that our guards were no longer there. Nobody was there... We were free... In the vicinity there was a little village, we asked the inhabitants if they could give us something to eat.

[...]

How do you live today with the memories of those times?

I try to forget, not to think about it, because it is too difficult. My health is now poor, I have all sorts of diseases. They recognized me as a war veteran, but only after I got that document sent back from Germany. Till then, I was not recognized...

What do you think - is it important to you that people in Germany are concerned with those questions, that there are memorials, research and projects?

Yes, I think this is something very positive.

Is it important for you to talk about the past?

Yes, I think so - in particular for the youth, they need to understand how it is when one gets to such a dreadful place at so early an age!

What do you think can young people learn from your story? What is the use for them to listen to your story?

Everybody can draw a lesson for themselves...

What can young Germans learn from your story?

Well, what I have told, how I survived... What else is there to learn? [He laughs] May God never let this happen again! I wish it for nobody!

[...]

This interview was conducted on November 7, 2001 in St. Petersburg.

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