

The Hippocratic Oath

By Semyon Yesselson

Ever since I was a kid, I've known that my maternal grandfather, was a doctor who served as an army medic during the World War II and went missing in 1941.

I remember the recollections of my mother and grandmother about a big get-together at their home on June 21 where they discussed the announcements of the Soviet news TASS agency that there would be no war.

Grandfather joined the army as a volunteer on June 23, 1941, the day after the war began (he was 46 at that time). He was immediately conscripted because of his extensive experience in the First World War and the Russian Civil War (1917-1922), as well as in the development of Hungry Steppe, an arid area in Soviet Central Asia to be irrigated, where the work was murderously hard, similar to battlefield conditions. He was preparing for dispatch as a volunteer army doctor to Spain, to engage in the hostilities during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), siding with the left-leaning Republicans against the Nationalists headed by General Franco and supported by the German Nazis. But he never got a chance to go.

I remember my grandmother's story about how grandfather and she were doctors in Tsimla (a Cossack village) during the collectivization. Collectivization was a social reform undertaken by the Soviet government in the late 20s – early 30s, when peasants were forcibly assembled into cooperatives and had most of their property confiscated, keeping only a house and a small plot of land, and also sometimes one cow and/or one horse. Different regions had different expropriation standards.

Once a nursing assistant informed on grandfather treating a daughter of a kulak (a higher-income farmer whose property was subject to expropriation). His daughter was suffering from a continuous hemorrhage, and nobody could help to cope with it, until my grandfather came to the rescue. Grandfather was ultimately summoned to an NKVD department (state security police). He told them that when he graduated as a doctor he took the Hippocratic Oath, he is faithful to it and he would keep it - never abandon a patient in trouble, and treat patients regardless of their social origin. He said: "I treated the daughter of a kulak, but in case you own daughter gets ill, I will come to her rescue, too". Grandfather was released.

I remember in the 50s and the early 60s my grandmother and I used to go regularly to the military commissariat, where my grandmother always got the answer that there was no information about grandfather. I remember the story that in 1946 my grandmother accidentally met on a street in Rostov a doctor who had served with grandfather in the same hospital in 1941. He told her that they were encircled, the army was leaving, but there were many badly wounded men in the hospital. They had to decide what to do. Part of the medical staff decided to retreat with the army. Grandfather decided to stay with the wounded. According to the doctor, he said to grandfather: "Semyon, we must leave, we'll perish, the fascists will shoot all the wounded anyway". Grandfather replied: "Even if they will be shot, the people will not be abandoned until their last minute. I took the Hippocratic Oath. I am staying. Come what may." It was in the Ukraine, in September 1941. When grandmother encountered this doctor she was taken aback and did not ask where exactly

this happened. She could not find him after that - probably he came to Rostov to see friends or relatives. Since then we have not known anything either about grandfather's fate or about the hospital.

In 1983 my grandmother died. Then in 1995, we have learned about the existence of the Archives of the Ministry of Defense, located in the town of Podolsk. My parents wrote there and from the answer they received they understood they should write to the Military Medical Archives in St. Petersburg. They wrote, but received no answer.

In 2000, fate brought me to St. Petersburg, and I came to the Military Medical Archives. It turned out that in the 90s they did not respond to letters because the Archives had no funds for envelopes. I left them some envelopes. Soon I began to receive answers from them. It turned out that grandfather served in the 67th mobile field hospital, assigned to the 26th army of the South-Western Front. It was one of those armies that were encircled after the fall of Kiev. And it was the only army that managed to get out of the encirclement. I also was able to find out the list of the dispositions of the hospital in 1941.

Since then, I took every opportunity to go to Ukraine on business. In April 2002, there happened one of the most amazing events in my life. I took the night train from Dnepropetrovsk to Minsk. But early in the morning, something suddenly awakened me. We had crossed the Dnieper. Wide calm mirror-like water. Flood plains. Coppices. Marvelous places. And suddenly a voice sounded inside me: "Your grandfather died here." I looked out of the window stunned - we were passing the Palmira railway station.

Ultimately, I began to explore the list of dispositions of the hospital, starting from the last one. It turned out that the hospital never reached those locations. To my surprise, every place I visited, I met very old people, miraculously still living there, with a clear memory - witnesses of the events of 1941.

According to the evacuation plans, the hospital was supposed to move along the pre-planned route, which was recorded on its archive card, but it never did so. A catastrophe occurred - the Germans breached our defenses in multiple places at the same time and destroyed the Front's headquarters. The latest records of the Front's Main Sanitary Directorate that were stored in the archives of the Ministry of Defense referred to the second half of September 1941 and were written in pencil. There was no reliable information about the movements of the hospital - obviously someone wrote down a list of planned evacuation locations instead of actual dispositions.

I came to Orzhitsa, a district centre in the Poltava region. From there, the 26th Army launched a break-out. The last telegram of its commander, General Kostenko, to the Supreme Headquarters of September 23, 1941: "The situation is extremely difficult. After dark, I'll try to break out with the remnants... We are forced to leave in Orzhitsa the huge baggage-trains of the Front, and the wounded who cannot be transported out". However, there were no traces of the army hospital in Orzhitsa – only the reference to some battalions' medical units, which I found in the local museum. I saw the conditions in which our army broke out of the encirclement - through impassable marshes, where many people drowned. But they broke out, and carried the banner.

In Orzhitsa, I found out that the southern flank of the Army was confronted by the Waffen-SS Division "Das Reich". While I was doing my investigations, it was November 23, 2004 and the passions of the Orange Revolution raged in Kiev. I perceived what was going on there as something temporary, even fleeting, while it seemed to me that I was touching

something eternal. On that day, I was exploring the Palmyra station, which was next to last on the list of locations. We drove along the road in the Cherkasy region looking for a junction leading to the station. On the way we passed the villages that were named, according to the ancient custom, in honour of the temples that stood there. The names were as follows: Hristovo, Rozhdestvenskoye, Preobrazhenskoye, Voznesenskoye (*In Russian derivatives of Christ, Christmas, Transfiguration, Ascension respectively - translator*). Voznesenskoye turned out to be the Palmyra station.

Everything just fell into place. Sullen men with sticks, who did not let strangers' vehicles into the village, suspecting they were malicious agitators for the "Orange" or the "Blue" (the colours of the opposing factions in Ukraine's Orange Revolution), let us in. I told them that all this momentary fight between political parties did not matter to me, since I have arrived to find out what was going on here in 1941. The first woman we met, a school teacher, started actively helping me. With her help I found the only witness – an 85-year-old woman, full of strength and with a clear memory. She said amazing words: "I've realized why I am still living, all around me are dying, but I continue to live. I am the last witness. I've been living to tell it."

September 1941. The SS-Division "Das Reich" entered the village and found a hospital in the school (it was transferred there by our soldiers from the station before the Army left). The SS soldiers immediately shot the doctor, the nurses and the wounded in front of the school and moved on. Villagers buried them all in a mass grave. In post-war years, an act was issued to close all the cemeteries in the centre of the village - the cemetery was closed and a park was planted instead.

I picked up a pinch of soil from there and brought it to grandmother's grave, who had been waiting for grandfather all her life until her death in 1983. That was how he returned to her:

My grandfather, a doctor, Semyon Veksler, a graduate of the Medical Faculty of Rostov State University (formerly Warsaw Imperial University, which moved to Rostov in 1915).