

# **Vinnitsia – The Katyn Of Ukraine**

## **A Report by an Eyewitness**

**by Mykhailo Seleshko**

Toward the end of February, 1944, when I was marking time in a German prison in Potsdam, I was transferred to cell number 20, already occupied by several other prisoners. After a brief acquaintance I learned that one of these was a Ukrainian from the vicinity of Vinnitsia. We came to know each other closely and he told me his life history. At that time he was twenty-three years of age, born and bred in Soviet Ukraine. He had been educated by the Communist party and had been a Communist in the full meaning of the word. Communist ideals were his ideals. He fought on the German/Soviet front. After his capture by the Germans, he was forced into anti-aircraft artillery work for the Germans in Berlin. Because of negligence in line of duty he was thrown into jail. There our paths met.

I kept asking him questions about life under the Soviets. He formerly belonged to a civilian border patrol unit. Being a Comsomol, he took his duties seriously and helped track down many foreign intelligence agents who were trying to slip across the border into the Soviet Union. There were others, young Soviet patriots like himself, in the villages and districts.

He told me of the steps taken by the Soviets in Ukraine as a preparation for war. In the Communist party at least as early as 1937 it was felt that war against Germany was imminent. Confidential instructions to members of the party and the Comsomol stressed this eventuality. These instructions ordered that the Soviet hinterland in Ukraine be purged of enemies of the people. By the words “enemies of the people” were meant not only all those people who worked actively against the Soviet regime, but also those who were believed to be inclined to hostility toward the government including those whose complete devotion to the regime had not been clearly manifested.

A purge of enemies of the population of the Soviet border regions was commenced. Herein lies the story of the Ukrainian tragedy in Vinnitsia, which was revealed to the world in 1943. (Vinnitsia is a Ukrainian city, which was, prior to 1939, approximately 100 miles from the eastern border of Poland.)

My young companion is now a Ukrainian patriot, and much about him must not be made public. Everything he said supplemented my own knowledge of the Vinnitsia tragedy and helped to complete the picture I had formed of it during my experiences in Vinnitsia.

In the summer of 1943 I was living in Berlin under the close supervision of the Gestapo as a suspected foreigner, an unreliable alien and a Polish citizen. On July 2, 1943, during the noon hour, I was called to the telephone by what the Germans called the Ukrainian Confidence Service. This was a German government agency which registered all Ukrainians in Germany and tried to win their support for German purposes among the Ukrainians.

The chief of this agency informed me that in the near future a special committee for the investigation of mass murders in Ukraine would depart to do its work on the spot. He also told me

that I had been appointed interpreter for this committee because of my knowledge of German, Ukrainian, Russian, and Polish, and in addition because I knew how to type in both German and Ukrainian. He suggested that I accept this position voluntarily and at the same time emphasized that, should I refuse, I would be drafted for it on the basis of a certain mobilization regulation.

I had no choice. I asked for several hours to consider the proposal. I immediately got in touch with my friends, among them Dr. Oleh Kandyba-Olzhych, the Ukrainian poet, who was living illegally at that time in Berlin. We agreed that it would be best for me to go with the commission, even though its destination was not known. And I had not asked, for in Germany during the war it did not pay to be overly inquisitive.

After two hours I called the confidence service and announced my willingness to accompany the commission as a translator-interpreter, I was instructed to await further instructions via telephone. About 5 p.m. of the same day the headquarters of the criminal police telephoned. I was ordered to appear at their address and to report to an official named Denerlein. I went.

Denerlein, a friendly man of rather advanced age, immediately introduced me to several officials in his department, and said that we would depart for Ukraine immediately. After brief interviews I was given appropriate military travelling documents and allowed to return home.

The criminal police department was swarming with uniformed police, some of them wearing an arm-band marked SD, which meant that these officials were from the special political section Sicherheitsdienst. By piecing together various bits of conversation I deduced that our group was going to the front lines. Among the members of the commission were Raeder, Krupke, and Groner, all three commissars of the criminal police. State-councilor Klass, the chairman of the commission, was already at the place where the commission was supposed to function.

We set out July 4, 1943, by way of Warsaw, Lublin, Kovel and Shepetivka. Before our departure I was given a pistol as a preparation for any eventuality. We were unmolested in Warsaw, although at that time the battle in the Jewish ghetto was going on but beyond that city our route was through a region controlled by Ukrainian insurgents (UPA).

Immediately outside of Warsaw we passed long trains that had been blown up. In the town of Kovel in the Ukrainian province of Volyn we had to transfer to another train. Precautionary measures for defense against partisans were taken and, ridiculously enough, I was ordered to hold my pistol in my hand in ready position for firing against the machine-guns and mines of the guerillas. We were not attacked, however, for the insurgents shot up with machine guns the dummy tank train that had been purposely sent ahead of us and we experienced nothing beyond fear. At the railway station in Shepetivka, however, we met action on a somewhat broader scale. After our train, loaded with German soldiers, pulled in at the railway station, the Ukrainians destroyed all of the four rail lines leading into Shepetivka and we could not continue the journey. We managed to reach Vinnytsia without any losses, around 11 o'clock at night. We were driven in police automobiles to No. 5 Mazepa street. Under the Bolsheviks this had been named Dzherzhinsky street and the building had housed the regional headquarters of the NKVD.

### **Excavations in Vinnytsia**

In Vinnytsia I was informed about the purpose of the commission by one of its members, a photographer, who arrived in the city at some earlier date. With the aid of the civilian population mass graves had been discovered, in which thousands of corpses had been buried. These graves were to be opened and the commission was to establish whom the NKVD had murdered. The

commission lived and worked in the former headquarters of the NKVD, the place from which the mass-murder was directed. It included among its members German specialists in criminal investigation.

The exhumations in Vinnytsia began on May 25, 1943, and were carried on in three places. The population was of the opinion that there were around 20,000 victims in the war years. In addition to our commission two other bodies – a legal and medical commission – took part in the investigations.

Our committee unpacked its equipment, set up its office and on July 7, after lunch set out in automobiles for the scene of the exhumations – a garden along the Lityn highway, which leads from Vinnytsia to Lviv by way of Lityn.

From the conversation of the police, who were housed in the same barrack that we were, I had gained a more or less adequate picture of what had taken place. The first sight of the corpses horrified me, as did the stench that came from them. It was a hot summer day and it was necessary to steel one's nerves in order to live through the horrible experience. I had been a soldier in the Ukrainian army during the First World War and had seen many men killed in battle, but what I had then seen can in no way be compared with what I witnessed in that park.

A huge mass of people were milling among the trees in the garden. Everything was permeated with the heat of summer and the horrible stench of corpses. Here and there workers were digging up the earth. From it with the use of ropes they pulled out human corpses, some of them whole, others in pieces. They laid them carefully out on the grass. At first it seemed to me that there were thousands of them, but later I counted them and there were but 700 lying on the grass. Everybody present had a serious expression. The local inhabitants examined the exhumed corpses, and scrutinized the remnants of clothing. From the graves workers threw out bits of cloth and placed them in separate piles. The wet clothes were spread on the grass to dry. The dry clothes were searched for papers and other belongings. Everything was taken out, and registered; the documents found were read, when possible, and recorded; those not legible were preserved. Now and then for one group or another burst out the agonizing, hysterical cry of a woman, or the groan of a man, which resembled the terror of death. A woman recognized the clothes of her loved ones, or a man those of a member of his family. All of them, it was later ascertained, had been sure that their relative were somewhere in exile in Siberia, perhaps, or in the Far East, in the North, somewhere. Now they learned how the Soviet government had fooled them, for their loved ones lay in Ukrainian soil, in Vinnytsia, murdered by the NKVD. The government had met all questions with the reply that all in exile were deprived of the right of communicating with their families.

After the first shock had lessened, and I had become accustomed to the sweet, unpleasant stench, I took a greater interest in the investigations. The digging was done by common criminals from the local prison under the guard of German police. Alcohol was frequently given to the workers so that they might be able to stand the stench. Men and women, clothed and unclothed, were dug up. Men with their hands tied behind their backs. Here and there heads that had been beaten in; sometimes the nape showed signs of bullet-wounds. Black corpses, mummified corpses, corpses yellow-black with cadaverous wax. They had been in the earth a long time, for the most part deformed by the pressure of the soil above. Member of the commission, old criminologists who had seen many a crime, affirmed that never before had they seen anything so ghastly. In an area close to the graves doctors made immediate autopsies and tried to ascertain the cause of death. The horror of Vinnytsia I shall never forget and it is doubtful whether ever a Dante would be able to portray the agony that had taken place.

Our next point was the Gorky Park of Culture and Rest, named in honor of the Russian poet. Here

the scene was no better than the previous one. A lesser number of corpses was unearthed, for the most of the digging was done in the garden along the highway. The bodies of mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers had been buried under the earth and over it a board had been placed for the young people to dance and amuse themselves, unaware that their relatives' corpses were lying underneath! The names of those Communists responsible for such diabolical measures are known and it is hoped that their evil memory will not pass into history forgotten.

The picture was the same in the graveyard opposite the park. Beside the regular graves as well as under the stones of the original graves were found mass-victims of the NKVD.

### **The Commission at work**

The committee worked industriously. Witnesses of the horrible tragedy were questioned, the place of the criminal executions determined, and the time as well. Documents found either alone or on the corpses were analyzed, nothing was overlooked; German thoroughness, often approaching absurdity, as it seemed to me, was employed. I was not acquainted with the techniques of criminologists, the clues they put together in order to arrive at the facts, and often what to me appeared beyond dispute they accepted with reservations and searched for unimpeachable evidence. The hours of work were from 10 to 16 each day. I was used as an interpreter between the local inhabitants and the German specialists. Thousands of people volunteered to act as witnesses for the commission. They volunteered in spite of the fact that Bolshevik agents made many threats of revenge, and insisted that the Germans had killed these people and were now seeking to place the blame on the NKVD. This twist interested me and I paid special attention in order to ascertain its veracity. Insofar as I am concerned there is no doubt that the unearthed corpses in Vinnytsia were the first victims of the Bolsheviks, murdered in what was in fact a preparation for war.

I cannot describe the entire work of the commission, all that it ascertained and concluded. I imagine that its findings have been recorded in detail and are available somewhere. As a Ukrainian in civilian attire it was easy for me to get around, for I felt that I was at home, on native Ukrainian soil. The Germans, of course, did not enjoy such a confidence in Vinnytsia, for they had come as conquerors. A complete history of the entire tragedy will one day be written by historians. I was forbidden from doing anything on my own and was able to maintain official contact with my friends only through the German military post office, which was scrutinized by the Gestapo. I made no personal notes. Instead, another opportunity presented itself: through the kindness of one of the members of the commission I was able to send personal letters to Ukrainian friends in Berlin. He gave the letters to a pilot assigned to regular duty between Berlin and Vinnytsia. I recorded as much as I could in the form of private letters, and the material arrived in the hands of my friends without accident. On the basis of these letters I am able to reveal the impression I had of the tragedy in Vinnytsia.

### **Some special incidents of the tragedy in Vinnytsia**

A few incidents will illustrate the tragedy.

The wife of a priest named Biletsky from the vicinity of Vinnytsia recognized the garments of her husband lying on a mound. She cleaned the garment and a patch was revealed. As proof that she spoke the truth she departed for her village, and returned to the commission a few days later with other bits of the material used for patching. The committee examined the material and agreed that the patch on the priest's coat came from the same material. This was proof that her husband had been shot and buried in Vinnytsia, but the NKVD had informed her that her husband was in exile

without the right of communicating with his family.

Hanna Hodovanets, a Ukrainian peasant woman, recognized her husband's coat as they unearthed it from a mass-grave. She told the police about her husband's arrest. He had been arrested because he had not reported at work on a certain holiday. She had done everything possible to find out what had happened to him, and one day in 1938 she received a card from Moscow, from the procurator's office and signed by none other than Audrey Vyshinsky, with the news that her husband had been freed from prison in March, 1938. However, her husband had never returned home and she felt that something was wrong. Her feelings became a sad reality when she recognized her husband's coat.

Another Ukrainian woman, Olkhivska by name, sat for hours on the hills of dirt as the corpses were lifted from the graves. At one grave she gave vent to cries of anguish. She had just recognized her husband, who had been arrested by the NKVD, by a broken small finger as well as by his clothes. And she too told a story that ended in a mass-grave.

There were similar examples by the hundreds, while thousands of others found no clues whereby they might identify their loved ones. I talked with them, recorded their tragedies, shared their suffering. The commission studied the methods of Soviet interrogation and trial, torture and execution, prison and exile. It interviewed thousands of witnesses, went through a mass of varied documents, and examined the belongings of witnesses.

The following incident suggests that justice may yet triumph in this world. A note was found in the coat of the exhumed corpse of a heroic Christian. It was wet, as was the corpse, but was carefully dried. Then I set to work to decipher it. With the aid of several local Ukrainians we put together the story. The paper was of ordinary stock, white in color, used on local school tablets. In crude handwriting was penciled: "I ... beg the person that finds this note to pass on to my wife, Zina ... from the village ... region of ... that I was denounced to the NKVD by the following ..." And here were the names and addresses of seven persons. The note continued: "They bore witness against me before the NKVD and spoke falsehoods. I have been sentenced to death and in a short time will be shot. God knows that I am innocent. Let God forgive their transgression; I have forgiven them."

We refused to believe what we had read. To expect such magnanimity from a simple peasant in the moment of death was too much to believe. But the fact stirred everybody. We informed those in charge of the investigation, and later it was found that it was all true. Two of the persons named in the note had died in the meantime, two were officers in the Red Army, and three were available in the neighborhood, peacefully going about their business, since no one knew that they were secret assistants of the NKVD. During my presences in Vinnytsia they were not arrested. The Germans, however, recorded all the secret helpers of the NKVD. Some of them managed to obtain administrative posts during the occupation, and often announced themselves as of German origin. The Germans were aware of this manoeuver and were preparing a surprise move called "lightning-action," blitzaktion. I was later informed that this "lightning action" had been executed before the Germans abandoned Vinnytsia.

Hulevych, Skrepek, and many other Ukrainians testified how the NKVD transported the corpses to the burial points. They stated that the bodies were transported from NKVD headquarters at No. 5 Dzherzhinsky street, that at night they saw and heard the trucks in action and that in the morning on their way to work they saw the blood that had dripped from the trucks and that they saw NKVD underlings covering up the signs of their work at the site of the mass graves. There were also witnesses who testified that from trees they observed what was happening behind the high walls of the NKVD compound and that graves were dug and corpses buried. It was a fact well circulated in the city that two Ukrainians, who had dared to peer through the board fence despite the prohibition, had disappeared never to be seen again. It was also common talk that a boy, who had tried to climb

the fence in order to steal some apples, disappeared without a trace after the NKVD guards caught him in the act.

### **How the NKVD operates**

I talked with those people in Vinnytsia who first divulged the information about the mass murders, on the basis of which excavation was begun by the Germans. The commission found a woman who had worked in the NKVD headquarters for fifteen years. She was superannuated, and not in command of all her mental faculties, but the memory of what had transpired long before she retained as though it had happened yesterday. When the Bolsheviki retired before the German advance, she remained in Vinnytsia by frustrating efforts made by the government to evacuate her. Her revelations, although chronologically vague, were valuable in that they described Soviet methods of investigation and punishment. Former prisoners of the NKVD gave corroborative testimony.

One such former prisoner, named Dashchin, who had been in exile in the Kolyma region, told of an incident in a gold-mining camp. The camp contained 7,000 prisoners from all parts of the Soviet Union, and upon completion of the work there it was evident that the means of transportation to another locality were not available. The prisoners were too weak from malnutrition to go elsewhere on foot, for the nearest work-camp was thousands of kilometers distant. The problem was solved very simply. The prisoners were driven to a cliff that had been mined, and were blown into oblivion. Dashchin was one of the few that miraculously survived the explosion. Somehow he managed to trek across Siberia and return to Ukraine.

The NKVD usually made arrests at night, searching the houses and later writing a protocol on the case. The Commission found very many of these protocols both with the corpses and in a separate grave where only documents were buried. All arrested were accused of being “enemies of the people.” Some had refused to renounce their religion, others had opposed the collectivization of their private property, still others had spoken dangerous words against Communism. Some had been victims of denunciations or revenge others had failed to appear at work during a religious holiday, while many had changed their place of work without the permission of the NKVD. Many witnesses questioned by the committee were unable to explain why their relatives had been arrested. Their inquiries addressed to the NKVD or the judge simply evoked the stereotyped reply, “enemies of the people exiled for a long period of time without the right of communication with their relatives.” Women appealed to Stalin and other leaders of the Soviet state, but the reaction was the same. I saw and read many cards carrying that message. Among the items found in the graves were remnants of priestly garments, religious books, and correspondence of the murdered with the authorities of the state and the police. Items discovered were put on display – photographs, letters, postage stamps, and crosses – and many residents identified their dead relatives by them.

A religious group in the region of Ulaniv deserves special mention. Called the sect of St. Michael, nineteen of its members were arrested by the NKVD and some of them were identified in the graves. They were recognized because it was their custom to wear a white cross sewn to their clothes. Garments with this cross were found in the graves, sometimes alone and at times still about the corpse. Many members of this sect visited the excavations and recognized their co-religionists.

### **Statistics of the tragedy**

From May 1943 to October 1943, 9,432 corpses were found in three places of excavation. There were 91 graves with corpses, and three with only clothes or documents. Forty-nine graves had from

one to 100 corpses, 33 from 100 to 200 corpses, and nine from 200 to 284 corpses. One hundred and sixty-nine corpses were of women, 120 of advanced age, according to the findings of the medical commission. Forty-nine women were of young or middle age. The corpses of females of advanced age were clothed, whereas those of the younger years were naked. This seemed to bear out the rumors common among the local population that the young women arrested by the NKVD were subjected to sexual brutalities prior to their execution. One pregnant woman was found who had actually given birth to a child in the grave. Most of the corpses were of people from 30 to 40 years of age. Most had died from bullets from a special gun. Some of the victims had been hit by two bullets, others had but one bullet hole, while still other had received as many as four. Evidences of skull fracture by means of an instrument, apparently the butt of a rifle, was found in 391 cases. The stronger men had their arms and legs bound. Cases of shooting in the forehead as well as the back of their head were recorded.

Of the total of 9,432 corpses 679 were identified, 468 by their garments, 202 by documents, and 2 by body marks. From the point of view of occupation the identified included 279 peasants, 119 workers, 92 officials, and 189 members of the intelligentsia. Nationally the identified were broken down into 490 Ukrainians, 28 Poles, and 161 uncertain, although the names of the last group suggested almost all the nationalities of the USSR and some from Europe as well.

These basic statistics speak for themselves. Only one place, the garden, was thoroughly examined, for the park and the cemetery were only partially investigated. It is not excluded that many more bodies had been buried in these places. Other localities, which according to the reports of the local population, were also scenes of mass murder by the NKVD were not inspected. It was ascertained that other Ukrainian cities that had been regional and district headquarters of the NKVD had also experienced mass executions. Efforts were made to verify the rumors circulating among the population regarding mass graves. Kiev, Odessa, Zhytomir, Berdychiv, Haisyn, Dnipropetrovsk, Krasnodar in the Kuban region, and other places were supposed to be investigated, but chaotic conditions in Ukraine frustrated such endeavors, It is known, however, very definitely that in Krasnodar, where the Kuban cossacks fought stubbornly against the Bolsheviks in an effort to win independence, the NKVD employed a special machine which ground up the bodies of those shot and oftentimes still living persons as if they were meat and automatically dumped this mass of flesh into the Kuban river. This brutality was affirmed by eyewitnesses who reported various phases of the slaughter.

My companion in the German prison in Potsdam told me that in 1937 instructions were given both to the Communist party and the Comsomol to cleanse the border districts of Ukraine of "enemies of the people." This purge was carried out. The revelations of this former Comsomol both agreed with and supplemented the findings obtained by the committee of investigation.

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