

GRIGORYEVA, Neonila
Latvian Witness to the Holocaust
Russian Language
RG-50.568.0016.01.01

Original language: В данном интервью, взятом 22 ноября 2003 года, Неонила Григорьева 1931 года рождения рассказывает о массовом уничтожении еврейского населения, которое ей довелось увидеть в тот злочасный день в самом начале войны на окраине города Даугавпилса в Латвии. Тогда Неониле было всего лишь десять лет и она играла во дворе с друзьями. Кто-то из местных детей прибежал и сказал, что евреев ведут на расстрел к Красавскому озеру. Детвора, понятное дело, помчалась смотреть. Неонила описывает, как вели евреев на расстрел, кто при этом присутствовал, как убивали, и так далее. Она много плачет и ей очень тяжело мысленно возвращаться туда, где пьяные полицейские в бодром настроении вырывали детей из материнских рук и бросали живыми в яму, как матери прыгали сверху на детей, пытаясь защитить их своим телом, как полицейские за это били матерей прикладом по голове, как бросали в яму избитых но еще живых стариков, как с ушей вырывали сережки, как дрожала и стонала земля пару дней после расстрела. Если бы Неонила могла вернуть время назад, она бы никогда в жизни туда не ходила. Все те крики, стоны и земля, пропитанная кровью, до сих пор не дают ей спать.

Translation: In this interview, conducted on 22 November 2003, Neonila Grigoryeva, born in 1926, talks about a mass shooting she had witnessed at the beginning of the war in her neighborhood, on the outskirts of the Latvian city of Daugavpils. Neonila was ten and she was playing with her friends outside. One of the neighborhood kids ran up to them and said that Jews were being escorted to the Krasavka pond to be shot. Of course, kids were curious and ran to watch. Neonila describes how the Jews were escorted, who was present at the shooting site, how people were killed, and so on. She cries a lot throughout the interview, and you can just tell that it is very painful for her to relive the moments, in which drunk policemen excitedly snatched little children from their mothers and threw them in the pit alive, in which mothers jumped right on top of their children as if trying to protect them, in which the policemen hit these poor mothers on the head with a rifle, in which the beat up but still alive elderly were thrown in the pit alive, in which the earrings were ripped off women's ears, and in which the ground vibrated and moaned days after the shooting. If Neonila could go back in time she would have never went there. All those screams, moans, and the pit filled with blood still haunt her.

01:00:47:07 - 01:05:51:20
0:39 - 5:44

File 1 of 1

A: Good evening.

Q: First I would like to thank you for inviting us to your home and letting us conduct this interview. Thank you very much.

A: You are welcome. I have a few things to share with you.

Q: Please, say your first name, your given name, and your date of birth.

A: Neonila Grigoryeva. 26 January 1931.

Q: Let's talk about your childhood years before the war. Where and with whom did you live?

A: I lived with my parents. My father did not have a steady job and was registered with the employment bureau. Luckily, at that time our Latvian government helped large families in need. There were seven children in our family. Well, six at that time. The seventh sibling was born after the war. We lived in a private apartment, and all my barefoot childhood was in the sand. We walked barefoot all the time. Our street led to springs, Tanaev fields, and a warehouse. The barbed wire stretched from the warehouse to our sands.

Q: Talk about your childhood friends the ones that you went to school with and who lived near you.

A: I attended Latvian school. Why I was talking so much about sand because the area we lived in had a lot of yellow sand similar to the sand you may find in a desert. And there were two beautiful springs, flowing into a small pond. This pond was deep and very clean. We would often play and chase each other there. It was a popular gathering spot. People were very friendly in our lands, and we had never had any cultural conflicts, taking into account that among us were people of all sorts of nationalities, including Jews (I do not remember their last names, but I remember Todik, Eva, etc.), Russians, Latgalians, Latvians. My friend, for example, was a Polish Catholic girl, Vanda by name. We always played together. My brothers and sisters also played, chased each other, and sunbathed there. This was a very beautiful place, and children just loved it. Even adults would go there [talks about this place with tears on her eyes]. There was nothing better than digging in that golden sand and sunbathing next to Krasavka pond. The pond was called Krasavka because it was not far from the Krasava highway. Now it is called Parakhovka. So before the war, we played there nicely as one big happy family. There were a very few Jews in Latvian school. My family was very large, and we were acquaintances with one man, Mr. Yofa. He owned a store, and he would always accommodate us with food. When my father got paid, we would pay him

back. He was good, sincere, and always helpful. He helped us with food, especially with children yogurt [crying]. He would give us candy and remember us on holidays. He would bring us a Christmas Tree. He was just... Excuse me, I can't... It's just hard [crying].

01:05:51:20 - 01:10:01:00
5:44 - 9:53

Q: I see that it is a very painful topic for you. Let's talk about the beginning of the war. Do you remember that time in Daugavpils?

A: Yes. I remember how the fascists arrived and how people greeted them. Some people were glad to see them, but the majority weren't. After all, they were not our people even though we had all kinds of people. Our landlord was German, but he was different. Regular Germans were ok, but the SS ones were horrible. People wanted to help the Jews, but nobody could come up to them, fearing to be shot right then and there. The same was the case with prisoners. Only with the permission one could come up to them. There was a cemetery for military prisoners of war not too far from my home. This was truly gruesome. The Germans would bring bodies, dump them in pits dug beforehand, and you know what's worse? They wouldn't cover them with dirt in the winter. So the pits would remain open. Sometimes, they would dump wounded prisoners who were still alive. We often heard moans coming from there. It is very painful to think back about that. When these pits became full of corpses then they would be covered with dirt. There are now small houses there. The majority of people did not support what was going on.

Q: Did you see any arrests of Jewish people?

A: Yes, I did. My sister worked in a Jewish ghetto, at the boiler section, in a large building. I was completely destroyed later, but at that time, Jews worked there. They all had a star sewed on the back on their clothing. I do not know why. Our Mr. Yofa did not surrender. When they came to arrest him, he shot himself. They blew up his home with his store.

Q: How do you know about that?

A: My mother told me. She came home and told us that he had shot himself. We all cried [crying].

Q: Your mother told you?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you see with your own eyes any of your neighbors being arrested?

A: No, I did not see with my own eyes, and I couldn't. All the Jews were arrested in

the first few days and moved into the ghetto. It was the very beginning of the war, 1941, and the first people, walking to their own execution by shooting, had no idea what was awaiting them because they had bundles with personal possessions. Later on, when the rest of the Jews learned about these mass shootings, they would bury gold earrings and other gold jewelry so the barbarians would not get a hold of them. Some people tried to find this gold, digging all over the place. It's terrible. My mother used to say, "You can't make a fortune of the gold covered in blood."

Q: Did you personally see people being escorted to a shooting site?

01:10:01:00 - 01:15:09:10

9:53 - 15:01

A: Yes, I did. Generally, they were escorted by policemen. I did not see any Germans among them. These policemen must have been from all over Latvia because we didn't have that many. They must've. Many of them were drunk and irritated. I didn't see how exactly they escorted. By the time we ran up to where the Jews were escorted, they had already passed. So I saw everything from the back. I was ten then. Someone told us, the kids, that there would be a mass shooting of Jews in our Krasnovka, and we, of course, ran to watch. We weren't allowed to get close to the pit. If we could go there, I would show you its exact location. Civilians stood aside watching. The pit was heavily guarded. The Jewish people tried to talk to bystanders, but they were ordered to keep quiet. They begged to at least save the children, offering gold, but there was no way to help them. Everyone feared to be shot. It was horrible. Little children were snatched from their mothers, thrown in the pit alive, and their mother would jump in on top of them, as if trying to protect them. Screams, moans, blood everywhere. Elderly women, who could hardly walk, were thrown in alive as well. This huge pit was filled with blood [crying]. This scene was just unbearable. I couldn't sleep after that.

My mother was mad at me for going to the shooting site that day, but I was just curious. All the kids of 10-14 years of age did. You know how children are. The civilians were forced to go there and watch. They had to stand aside and watch but not get close to any Jews.

Q: Who were these civilian bystanders? Did you know them?

A: You know, the people I knew have already passed away. There were people from my street, nearby streets, and from as far as Novostroetsk (they came from the prison "Beliy Lebed", Korovavaya Tropa, Varshavskaya Street, Yatniky Street, and our Krasavka Street). You know, there used to be an alms-house on the Krasavka. Then there were military buildings and a mental institution where Germans killed all the patients.

Q: Let's talk more about the shooting site. Please, describe it. How far did you stand? What did you see?

A: We saw pretty much everything because it was out in the open, next to the pond and surrounded by the sand. The pit was dug beforehand. I remember the Jews being escorted. They walked right by us. Some of them crawled because they were beaten with a rifle. They held on to each other. You know, entire road was covered with blood. People who could walk walked; the ones who couldn't were forced to crawl [with tears on her eyes].

Q: They walked right by you?

A: Yes, the police told us to move back to clear the path and then walked in the middle of us. Policemen stood in front of us, separating us from the prisoners. So, we were close, but not too close. There was no way to communicate with these people.

Q: What about you? Did you stand close?

A: Yes.

Q: Approximately how many meters away?

A: About two. They wouldn't let us get closer than that.

Q: How many meters did you say?

A: About two meters. May be even less than that because we could see everything very good. You know, if you could go there, you would see how open that area is. You can see everything from everywhere, including lowland, small vegetation looking like peas, and the pond. It is very similar to a Borodin panorama.

Children, of course, were in front. This horror shook us. Children cried [crying]. This would hunt us in our dreams for a long time. It was awful.

01:15:09:10 - 01:20:14:09

15:01 - 20:06

Q: You said that you stood close to the pit. How many meters?

A: About 1.5-2 meters.

Q: So close?

A: Yes. Three meters at most. We were separated by the cordon line.

Q: Wow, you were allowed to stand that close?

A: Yes. People were forced to be there. The police wanted people to watch.

Q: Who stood in the cordon?

A: The policemen. There might have been a few Germans, but, generally, the policemen stood in the cordon.

Q: What did they wear?

A: They were in camouflage police uniforms. I do not remember these uniforms much.

Q: Are you sure that the people escorted to the shooting site were Jews?

A: Yes. They cried and spoke in Jewish manner. They had stars on their clothes. They were definitely Jews.

Q: What language did they speak?

A: Who?

Q: The Jews.

A: In their language and in Russian. They pleaded to people in Russian to help them, but there was no way to help them. They begged to save their children, but it was impossible. If somebody attempted to do that he or she would have ended up in that pit. No one could help them.

Q: Did you see the shooting?

A: Yes, I saw everything.

Q: Were the people forced to get undressed before they were shot?

A: No. They were shot dressed in their clothes.

Q: You said the pit was large?

A: Yes. It looked like a very long ditch dug beforehand. You can easily pinpoint that spot now. You know, they were later exhumed and reburied. I have no idea how they could to rebury these poor people and this horror. I think they shouldn't have done that because that area is so beautiful. They should have let them rest in peace in that scenic sandy area. They should have made some kind of memorial by the pond in the grassy area. I doubt they could exhume all the people. And the amount of blood that was shed there just cannot be reburied. Nor can all the moans. And what's in that place now? Nothing! This spot is not even included in the

Vostochniye Seti. No one wanted to build anything there; after all, so many people died there. People know that it is a cemetery. So, it is an empty spot with small bushes and small birch trees. In other words, there is nothing there.

Q: Can we talk a little more about the mass shooting?

A: Go ahead.

Q: Did they shoot everyone at the same time or in groups?

A: People were shot in groups along the pit. I can't tell you how many. I do not remember. Keep in mind that I was a child. I was only ten. The only thing I remember is screaming, moaning, and the ground moving afterwards. We lived in the sandy area, and I am telling you - you could hear and feel everything. After the shooting, we could hear moaning and movement coming from the sand. The ground was moaning. Can you imagine how horrific that was?! I can't even find words to describe that. You know even people from neighboring streets could not bear being in their homes, listening to moaning and screaming. You know in panoramic places everyone hears everything.

Q: This was heard on the first day after the shooting?

A: On the first and after. Everyone in the area heard.

Q: Was the pit covered eventually?

A: Yes, it was covered later.

01:20:14:09 - 01:25:08:14
20:06 - 25:01

Q: Who covered it?

A: I do not remember. I think prisoners of war.

Q: Did you see them doing that?

A: I do not remember. You know I was so traumatized by what I saw that everything was a blur and I left half dead myself. This is the most traumatizing thing a child can experience. Kids these days are more adapt to seeing violence on TV, but in our time, there was just no such violence and horror. I am very sensitive. I take it hard when a bird or an animal dies. Can you imagine how I felt seeing people die?!
[with tears on her eyes]

Q: Do you remember the victims vividly? Were they adults, children, elderly?

A: There were and adults, and children, and elderly.

Q: And they were taken to the pit in small groups?

A: Yes.

Q: How large were these groups? 5, 10, or more people?

A: More. The little children were snatched from the mothers and thrown in the pit alive.

Q: And you saw that?

A: Yes, I did. I am praying such horror will never ever happen again!

Q: Which policemen were shooting? The ones who stood in the cordon?

A: No. There was a special team for that.

Q: How many policemen were there on the team?

A: I do not remember anymore. Maybe 20, maybe more. I am not sure.

Q: How many stood on the cordon?

A: Many. There was a lot of them because there was no way we could come up to the victims. Neither could they.

Q: What language did the policemen speak?

A: For the most, they spoke Russian. You know I knew some of them. They are from our area. Their families were repressed. I cannot give you any names because I will put myself in danger. Father Victor once did, and people ransacked and burned his church and beat him up. There were witnesses. The charges were filed, but the case was closed because, allegedly, there was not enough evidence. So if I give you any names I'll be either dead or put away tomorrow. They could lock me up at the loony-bin. They will find the way to silence me.

Q: So there were people you knew among the policemen?

A: Yes.

Q: Now, you said that the policemen were intoxicated?

A: Yes, they were intoxicated and agitated. It was horrible. They reminded me the Germans in the city of Smolensk who would rejoice during the mass shooting of

Byelorussians. The same was here.

Q: Did you or your parents see or talk to any of these policemen after the shooting?

A: Yes.

Q: What did they say?

A: They said that Jews should be exterminated. That's how these people were. At first, they were Aizsargs. When the Soviets came in some of them went to the military academy. As soon as Russians left they became policemen. They were in jail for some time but were freed eventually. Now that we are a free society and because they and their families were repressed they have benefits, such as free travel. There you have it. So yes I knew some of them, knew very well, but I just can't tell you who they were. I can't. Their families live here.

01:25:08:14 - 01:30:11:22

25:01 - 30:04

Q: What did they tell you at that time?

A: Who?

Q: Policemen.

A: They didn't tell me anything because I was a child. But they told my parents that Jews were a nation that needed to be exterminated and that if we felt sorry for them we could end up being killed ourselves. They also said that the only people who would survive were the ones who would follow the fascists. Even now we have Nazis openly demonstrating on the streets of Riga. How can we give out the names of those perpetrators, the ones that should be disclosed and tried?! We simply cannot do that.

Q: Are any of the children who were with you on that day still alive?

A: You know, all of my friend moved away.

Q: Where did they move?

A: Most of them passed away. If I will be 73 in January, you can imagine how old they are. My brother was there with me (born in 1927); my sister (1926); her friends (1925-1926). My friend Vanda lived in Riga - she has passed. Lilya Krapovna - she is also no longer with us. I do not know anyone who is still alive. If you asked me 5 or 6 years ago, maybe I would have been able to find someone who could confirm my words, but, unfortunately, everyone is gone. The other day, I walked through my childhood neighborhood and couldn't recognize anyone.

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Everyone is younger than me.

Q: Did you discuss what you saw with your friends and family?

A: Yes, I did. Everyone was talking about that horror around here. Everyone. People felt so bad for those Jewish people. We are a very friendly community, and most of us felt very bad. But, like I said, we just couldn't help them, there was no way. We were able to save only a few prisoners. One of them used to come to us to get a drink of water. One day he ran into our apartment trying to hide from the Germans. One German soldier asked my mom if she just saw a prisoner, and she said no. She spilled kerosene from the lamp on the floor and told the German that her clumsy kids spilled the last kerosene we had in the house. Because the smell was terrible and there was no other source of light, the Germans left, and that's how we saved that poor man hiding in our closet. Then we gave him new clothes and food, and he went on to the front. He wrote us a letter once. We do not know if he died during the war. He was the only one we heard from. The rest of them did not contact us. Only when people escaped we had an opportunity to help them. They ran to us because we lived out in the open. People's yards were not fenced in. That's how prisoners came to us. That's the only thing we could do. Now, those were prisoners of war. Jews, on another hand, were extremely guarded, and no one could get close to them. My sister, for example, worked at a ghetto. She repaired torn Jewish clothes confiscated from the Jews. She was 18 and was forced to work. Even she could not get close to these people. No one could. Workers were forbidden to give the residents any food or engage in conversations. We couldn't reach out to the Jews at all.

Q: Did the policemen who took part in the shooting keep any of the victims possessions?

A: Definitely. They grabbed what they could. They would rip earrings out of the victims ears. It was a horrible scene.

Q: Did you see that?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: So, they confiscated valuables?

A: Yes, the fascists scum bags did. That's exactly what they are.

Q: Did they confiscate any clothes?

A: Yes, they took clothes that were in the best shape. But the victims were generally in undergarments. So, yes, they definitely took everything of value.

01:30:11:22 - 01:36:18:14

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30:04 - 36:11

Q: Who took away?

A: These scum bags.

Q: Did you see that?

A: Yes. They left nothing of value. What I saw that day is indescribable: screams, moans, shots, gushing blood, children being thrown in the pit, crying mothers jumping on top of the children, and the police hitting the mothers on the head with a rifle. All of that is very hard to put into words. I was just ten. Can you imagine looking at all of this as a child? I was not able to sleep after that. These images still haunt me [crying]. You see how hard it is for me to talk about this without crying.

Q: Please, forgive us for asking all these tough questions. I can only imagine how hard it is for you to remember all of this. Thank you very much for letting us interview you.

A: You're welcome. I feel bad that I told you so little. That's all I remember. You know my hobby is writing poems. I dedicated one to that day and to those unfortunate people. Generally, I write about my life, my childhood. Although this topic is very painful for me, I still wanted others to know about what had happened.

Q: Would you read it to us?

A: The whole poem or some of it?

Q: A little bit [the poem recital is cut out].

Q: I'll ask you a few more questions.

A: Go ahead.

Q: Did the policemen shoot with rifles or with automatic weapons?

A: You know, I couldn't tell the difference at that age.

Q: Maybe you remember the sound the weapons made. Were the shots one at a time or continuous?

A: One at a time. I am not hundred percent sure, but I think one at a time. I couldn't tell the difference then, and even now I do not know much about weapons. I used to work in security service. So I am familiar with a Semenov carbine. I can take it apart and put it back together. I even shot with it. But that is the only weapon I am familiar with.

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Q: So these were separate shots?

A: Yes, all the policemen (entire row) would shoot at once. When the victims fell in the pit, they would bring in more.

Q: Did anyone give them an order to shoot?

A: Yes, in German.

Q: Do you remember hearing that?

A: Yes.

Q: Who gave the order?

A: There was someone in charge. He was German.

Q: Was he in uniform?

A: Yes, he was in uniform, SS uniform.

Q: SS?

A: Yes, in SS uniform.

Q: And he was the one giving the order?

A: Yes.

Q: How often did you hear him ordering to shoot?

A: Gosh, I can't even tell you, as soon as the new people were lined up. It was hard to hear the orders amidst all the screaming, moaning, crawling, beating, children being thrown in the pit, and so forth. I remember them constantly bringing new people to the pit and shooting them.

Q: Was there one person giving the order to shoot or were there more?

A: One.

Q: One?

A: Yes, the policeman in charge. I believe he was a SS. Again, I was only ten. If I knew as a little girl that I would be giving such interview, I would have tried to memorize more. When we, the kids, walked to the mass shooting on that day we

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had no clue what we were getting into. We knew the Jews would be brought in, shot, and buried in the pit. We were kids and didn't think.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: I am sorry for not being able to tell you more. Had I known about this interview, I would have memorized the names of the Jewish children with whom I used to play. Vanda, Edik, Dotik, and other children could care less about differences in cultures. We didn't care whether a child was Russian or Jewish. Kids of different nationalities respected each other and played well together.

Q: Did you see any of your friends at the shooting site?

A: Yes, I did. All my friends and I ran to the site. Our parents didn't know and then were mad at us because I wasn't able to sleep after that. Our parents were mad that we were sticking our noses where we shouldn't have. Since there was no way to help the Jews, my parents didn't go to the site. My mother had health issues - weak heart. So she didn't go. On the days of execution of prisoners, we would send her to church. Generally, that would be on weekends. She would go to church not to see all that horror. But it was definitely more horrible when Jewish people were shot. Words cannot describe that. The perpetrators of these crimes are doing very well today. They flourish here in Riga and throughout Latvia [the rest is cut off].