

KDRG YVA-142
Testimony of Shela Kremenchugskaya,
born in Krzemieniec, Poland, 1912

Regarding her experiences in Krzemieniec and as a Red Army nurse
Given July 25, 1985, in Russian

RG O.3, Testimonies Department of the Yad Vashem Archives,
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Translated from Hebrew by Batya Cohen; edited by Ellen Garshick, September 2022

Country: Israel

Language: Hebrew (testimony given in Russian)

Witness: Shela Kremenchugskaya

Schooling and profession: High school, nursing school

Address: Individual Nursing Home, Fikhman Street, Tel Aviv

Date, place of birth: Kremenets, Volhynia, 1912

Place of residence at the outbreak of the war/events described: Warsaw, escape to Kremenets, military service as a nurse

Main subject: Military service as a nurse on a hospital train

Contents of the testimony: She is not accepted to nursing school (in Warsaw's Jewish hospital) because she has a passport for stateless persons and is accepted only after she marries a husband with Polish citizenship. She works as a nurse. The war breaks out in 1939. She flees with her husband to Kremenets. There are German explosions. They cross the border without difficulty. She works in Kremenets as a nurse. War breaks out in 1941. Within four days, her husband is drafted, and she never sees him again. He falls at the front. She buries her mother after her death. Moves to [illegible].¹ Otherwise, she won't be able to be drafted;

¹ The Hebrew handwriting is illegible. The place is most likely across the border into Russia.

she is drafted immediately. As head nurse, she is in charge of bringing 120 wounded persons in 22 wagons—a journey of wagon bombings—in a prisoner train, eventually in a hospital train. She joins the train staff, which also travels to the front and brings wounded to the rear. There is the issue of being charged with spying. Matches were lit at night in order to give injections during bombings. She has a wonderful meeting with her aunt, a captain in the hospital. She is on the train until the end of the war as a lieutenant. She receives four decorations for excellence. On discharge she comes to her aunt in Leningrad—the only survivor from her family (other than a brother and sister who were in Israel). She works in a university clinic. She doesn't receive permission to immigrate to Israel because of secrets known by her husband, who is an engineer. After his death, she receives permission to immigrate. She immigrates in 1969. She works in an old-age home in Jerusalem for seven and a half years. She leaves with a lump sum and without a pension. She now works as a private nurse.

Place of Interview: Tel Aviv

Date of Interview: July 25, 1985

Name of Interviewer: Hillel Birger

Testimony Section

Witness: Shela Kremenchugskaya

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Home and Education

I was born in Kremenets, Volhynia, in 1912. My father was Zionist. At home there were arguments between Zionist segments. Two sons and two daughters—all were members of Youth Guard. A public primary school, a private Polish high school. In 1935 I traveled to Warsaw to study nursing in the Jewish hospital (the System). I couldn't be accepted because I wasn't a Polish citizen. We had *nansan* passports (for stateless persons after World War I) because my father was born in Russia. I hurried to marry to my husband (1935), a Warsaw native, and then I was accepted. I finished nursing school in 1938. My husband was an engineer and worked for a Polish company. His name was Mandelblat; this name is recorded only on my nursing diploma. I worked in the private clinic of Dr. Soloveychik, father of Dr. Soloveychik of Tel Aviv. He was a Zionist, a fan of Fascism.

War Breaks Out in 1939—Escape

War breaks out. We are in Warsaw. We left on foot when the Germans were already in Otwock near Warsaw and hadn't yet entered Warsaw itself. We were three couples. We walked in the direction of Kremenets, where my parents were living. I had bandages. I took care of them. We ate fruit, not always cooked. We walked in the roads, between crowds of refugees. Once we were "helped" by Germans. The women took our heavy backpacks on their backs. We heard cars behind us. The men hid. The Germans thought my friends and I were gentiles and asked, "Where to?" We answered, "To Lublin." (We had told the others that we would meet in the train station in Lublin.)

The Germans took us, spoke with us, showed us a map, and said that everything would be occupied. We said that we would meet them in Lublin. After a few hours of travel, we reached Lublin. We were hosted by my friend's relatives, and after two days we met up with the rest of our group as was agreed on. They made their way on foot and also by wagon. Along the way, we had a lift similar to the one described above. We crossed the border not far from Rovno without any difficulty. Three of us spoke Russian. The Russians believed us when we said we were fleeing the Germans. The attitude was wonderful. We reached Kremenets. I worked in the hospital, my husband as a translator.

War Breaks Out in 1941

I received a draft notice the day the war broke out (June 22, 1941). I was pregnant and had to choose whether to stay or to have an abortion and be drafted. I had an

abortion (June 23, 1941). My mother was dying. She died on June 25, 1941, and I buried her in the cemetery as I was bleeding, without anyone else there. There were bombings. I was immediately drafted (June 25, 1941). My husband was drafted on June 22, 1941, and I never saw him again. He fell at the Second Ukrainian Front, after eight months, in February 1942.

Moving the Wounded

Under the command of Poltruk, immediately after I was drafted, another two nurses and I were charged with bringing a convoy of about 120 soldiers wounded in bombings to a hospital in Tarnopol, in 22 wagons. I was appointed head nurse. On the way we found out that Tarnopol was already in German hands. We were three nurses in civilian summer dresses.

We were directed to Kiev. On the way were bombings. In a particular bombing, we spread out. One nurse disappeared with seven wagons. We remained with 15 wagons containing about 80 wounded. On the way, we met up with a train of Ukrainian prisoners who were said to have tried to shoot in the rear of the Soviet army. Of the 12 cars, they cleared out 3 cars for our wounded. Wooden planks were arranged, and we traveled like this for about two and a half months. There was a little bread, herring. We ate a little better than the prisoners, and at times we shared. And so it was until the stop before Kiev. At every stop I really begged to receive a few dressings. There was no iodine, just pomegranate grains. There were bombings. We had no uniforms or documents related to the moving of the wounded. We did not change clothes or shower the entire time. One of the wounded was without buttocks. When we changed his dressing, we discovered that it was full of worms—my friend fainted. It turned out that the worms ate from the pus and contributed to a quick recovery. We reached the Znamenska Junction station. We sent nine wounded to the hospital. While we were still standing at the station, six of them returned on crutches, saying, “There aren’t any nurses like you. We’re staying with you.”

On the Public Health Train

Before Kiev we met up with the Public Health Train W.S.P. [*Voyenno-Sanitarny Poyezd*]. I went with the political representative to the train commander, and I requested that he accept our wounded. At first, he didn’t agree. He let us bathe—the first time since I had left Kremenets three months earlier. I hugged my friend from joy, and we cried. They gave us borsht and met us with tea and cakes. We

handed over the wounded to the hospital in Berdyansk on the shore of the Azenovian Sea, and we two nurses joined the train's medical staff. We received uniforms. We traveled to the First Ukrainian Front. I received the rank of second lieutenant, and afterward, the rank of lieutenant. At the same time, we traveled to the front. We gathered the wounded who received first aid in *Med-San-Bat* (the Public Health and Medical Division), and we transferred them to the rear. The wounded lay on the three levels of wooden slabs, the serious ones lower down. Dressing materials were not lacking, and we also had food.

[I Was Wounded](#)

We reached the North Caucasus, at a camp at a major junction, Tykhorezk, Krasnodar Region. German airplanes arrived (November 21, 1941). They flew low to the ground and shot at the train. A female doctor with whom I became friendly came running and screamed at me to flee. I answered that I would not leave the wounded. The rest of the personnel fled from the train. The orderly saw that I remained, and he also stayed. The wounded told me to lie down. I was wounded in the shoulder by a bullet. The orderly was also wounded, and it was just the two of us. For this action I received a decoration of excellence and another three decorations later on.

We released the wounded at Mynvedy Station, not far from Kislovodsk. The commander of the train told me that he didn't want to give me up, and if I stayed, the Germans would come to me. I stayed on the train. I received "an improved food ration": 200 grams of butter, half a white bread, a box of turnips. A few days later they removed the bullet from my shoulder. Luckily, the bone wasn't damaged. We continued wandering around the Caucasus and releasing the wounded from hospitals to the hospital in Tbilisi. At the Georgiyevsk Station we took on wounded, and we had to cross a bridge. It was destroyed. We built it again, but it was again destroyed before we had finished rebuilding it.

[I Was Accused of Spying](#)

The hospital train waited three days to cross the bridge. Those were hard days, among the bombings. It was forbidden to have light on the train at night. We had some seriously wounded, and we had to give them morphine injections. My friend would light a match, and I would give the injection. We would manage to give five or six injections, and the station commander would suddenly appear and inform us that signals from the train were being provided to enemy planes. The

train commander did not understand what was being discussed. They began to bomb the train. The station commander wanted to arrest us, but the train commander was opposed. In the end, they gave him vodka, and thus we were saved. In the meantime, the bridge was fixed. We crossed it, and immediately afterward, it was again destroyed. We reached Siberia and continued to wander for two and a half to three years until the end of the war.

[I Found My Aunt](#)

We arrived in Donbas, at Starokonstantinov station. A lieutenant colonel came to the train and on the door saw a list of senior medical staff that began with the train commander's name, Chayimovits, a Jew, and my name, Kremenchugskaya. He says that in the hospital in Donbas there is a Sore Kremenchugskaya—she had just been here with the wounded. That was my aunt. I shook and couldn't work. They freed me, and I called. When I heard her voice, I was unable to speak. She came to me immediately. She had the rank of lieutenant. I had seen her when I was four years old. I had looked for her. I had written to the Medical Service many times, but I didn't get an answer. I already knew that of the entire family, only we remained alive in the Soviet Union. I already knew that my husband had fallen. A brother and sister were in Israel: my brother since 1929 and my sister since 1936 in Kibbutz Ein HaShofet. I remembered her face from a photo—she looks like her brother, my father. I began to receive letters and packages from her.

[In Leningrad](#)

She used to live in Leningrad. We decided to meet in Leningrad. After the war they wanted us to continue in the service, but I didn't agree and only continued for half a year. I was discharged in February 1946 and traveled to Leningrad. I worked in a university clinic until 1969, when I came to Israel.

[Antisemitism](#)

I had an Armenian patient with his entire body in a cast. He told me: "You look Jewish to me." I told him: "You also look Jewish." He answered: "If I had a drop of Jewish blood, I would commit suicide." I said "You do look Jewish." He wanted to throw me from the moving train. His friends agreed with them.

[Yiddish, an International Language](#)

During the last stages of the war, we reached the countries of Central Europe: Romania, Poland, Germany, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia. In the stations we received two

or three hours off while they waited for the locomotive. We would go shopping because we didn't have anything except our military clothes. In Romania, the Russians weren't liked, and they didn't want to sell to them, also because of the decreased value of the Russian currency. The shopkeepers' answers were, "We don't have any merchandise." I asked in Yiddish, and I was allowed in and bought many purchases for my friends, who waited for me. This scene was repeated in Hungary and elsewhere. My friends were amazed at the many languages I spoke. I explained that I spoke one international language: Yiddish.

Immigration to Israel

What happened to European Jewry was known to me only after my discharge. I applied to immigrate to Israel four times. In 1946 I married again, in Leningrad. My husband, an engineer, worked in Leningrad, in the main electronics office. He was considered to have confidential information, and I was rejected. He died in 1968, and I immigrated in 1969. During my wait, I was visited by my brother and sister, who came from Israel as tourists.

In Israel, I studied in an *ulpan* [intensive Hebrew language course] in Haifa for two and a half months. I began to work as a head nurse in a *Mishan* network nursing home in Jerusalem. I worked seven and a half years. I didn't get a pension, only a lump-sum payment.

Now I receive only Social Security benefits. I work as a private nurse—at first, I worked as a substitute nurse in a *Kupat Cholim* [health maintenance organization] organization, and now I work with a specific patient.

Testimony given in Russian on July 25, 1985

Recorded by Hillel Birger