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«The Holocaust through the eyes of the liberators of Auschwitz»

My name is Alexei Rogatykh, I study at the Master's program of the Russian State University for the Humanities. At the beginning of the school year, I entered a small group of students and undergraduates at the Holocaust and genocide Centre of my university, which participates in the unique project "Liberators". The goal is to collect biographical information about all participants of liberation of Auschwitz prisoners, media coverage, and to collect the biographies of freed Jewish prisoners. It is estimated that this information will reach about 25,000 people in about 30 states. They are posted on a specialized site (for now - only in Russian). Young people from many cities of Russia take part. I was interested in this project, because my master's work is connected with the history of the Second World War. In the project, I was in charge of studying documents related to the history of the liberation of Auschwitz. These are documents of the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. But I also read the memories of Soviet generals and rank-and-file participants. The central question of the study is whether the plan for the Vistula-Oder operation was changed when the Soviet command learned about the Auschwitz death camp And how this change affected the fate of the prisoners. It was also important to establish on the basis of the documents - which divisions liberated Auschwitz and its branches, what losses the Red Army suffered in the battles for Auschwitz.

In the winter of 1944-1945, the Red Army prepared a decisive offensive against the position of the Wehrmacht in Poland. The first goal of the operation was the liberation of the ancient Polish city of Krakow. The troops of the First Ukrainian Front had to do that as soon as possible in order to continue the offensive and reach the strategically important Silesian industrial region. The Soviet command set purely military objectives to the troops, but they did not forget that thousands of prisoners in the Nazi death camps were waiting for liberation. That is why soldiers of the Red Army read out special reports on the fate of those who had been taken away in bondage by the Germans. When the crimes of the Hitler regime were talked about, the emphasis was on the fact that the victims of it were all peoples of Europe. Because of this, the disasters of the Jewish people did not stand out separately. It did speak about the death camps in these materials.

By January 26, units of the 60th Army came very close to the city of Auschwitz (Oswiecim) which was to storm the 472-y rifle regiment. Soldiers of the Red Army managed to completely liberate the city only by the morning of the next day. 25 soldiers and officers, among whom was the commander of the regiment, a jewish colonel S.L. Bezprozvanny, gave their lives for the liberation of the city from the Nazis or were wounded. After the liberation of these two cities, soldiers of the Red Army liberated Auschwitz and all its sub-camps. Other parts of the 60th Army also distinguished themselves in these battles, for example, Colonel V.Ya. Petrenko's (his memories were published in France) and the formations of the 59th took part in the battle. In all, about 300 (?) Soviet soldiers and officers died during these battles. As we can assume from the documents of the units of the 60th Army of the First Ukrainian Front, there were no battles directly for the camp, because The German command had decided to leave them without resistance.

Red Army soldiers managed to liberate more than 4,500 prisoners, to whom Soviet doctors tried to provide medical assistance. One of the former prisoners of Auschwitz, the German Jew Otto Frank (the father of the famous Anne Frank) wrote in his first letter to his mother that he had been liberated and treated by Soviet soldiers and doctors.

According to official documents and memoirs, about three thousand former prisoners voluntarily joined the Red Army in order to take revenge on the Nazis for their persecution and sufferings. Most likely, these people worked in the sub-camps of Auschwitz.

The liberation of Auschwitz became one of the turning points in colonel V.Ya. Petrenko's life. He was so struck by what he had seen in one of the sub-camps that for a long time after the war he had dealt with issues related to the conduct of the Vistula-Oder operation (during which the prisoners of Auschwitz-Birkenau were liberated). Also, he took part in commemorative events dedicated to this event from the 60s.

Sometimes he heard reproaches against the Soviet command, that it did not do everything possible to free the camp prisoners as soon as possible. Such words deeply hurt V.Ya. Petrenko, because he knew more than anyone else what difficulties the 60th Army had to face during the operation. However, the memory of the victims of the Nazi regime made him constantly criticize himself and others for the insufficient speed of the offensive. Although he understood perfectly well that the soldiers and officers of the First Ukrainian Front did all that they could do to free the territory of Poland in the winter days of 1945.

The project "Liberators" continues. Its results will be presented at the exhibition, which will be opened today in the UNESCO building.

Thank you.