

Victor Shenderovich is a Jewish, Russian-speaking journalist. He was recently forced to leave Russia because of his anti-Putin publications. This story was written by Victor several years ago.

Tell a story

Personally responsible

By Victor Shenderovich
translated from Russian by Julie Zhuk

In the summer of 2004. I was in the city of Zurich in Germany. I happened to be walking along the wonderful Bahnhofstrasse. This street in Germany comes from lakes to the station. The name is actually Vokzalnaya. I will never forget my walk to the station and back.

It wasn't about the beauty of this with the cute trams and the cozy street of the Western European city. As I walked, I found myself between two elderly Germans. They had been friends since the late 1930's.

On my left was a family friend, Eric Peschler. He was born in 1922 and he was from the former Studios doc. Cinema Zurich TV. His father, Albert, was a general in the Wehrmacht. He was not just a general, but someone who had gotten extremely close to Hitler. In the year 1939, Eric by that time had not only the drama of love for a Jewish girl (who was forced to leave Germany with her family), but listened to British radio and hated the Nazis.

It got to the point where Eric quarreled with his father, left home, and left Germany for good. He lived in London, Paris, Rome, Moscow, and Zurich. From the beginning to the mid 1960's (during the time of our THAW), he, already a well-known journalist, did not live long in the Soviet Union. He wrote a book called "Private Life in the USSR", which included, among other things, a story about my dad, at that time the chief conductor of the State orchestra of Belarus, with whom they met at a concert in Moscow.

In our country, Eric's book was branded as anti-Soviet, in the West, on the contrary as pro-communist. Poor Eric was torn between two fires. But I digress... To my right...

To my right was a man who knew Hitler intimately, who had dined with him more than once, who personally knew the entire top of the Third Reich. It was actually himself who was his highest part. His first and last name became a household name and were synonymous with power that was above the SS. All of this was impossible to believe. But it was exactly like that, this man's name was... I'm embarrassed to even say his name, it's so odious. His name was Martin Bormann.

I guess what you thought, no I am out of my mind. Of course, this was not the former Reichsleiter of Germany, the head of the NSDAP Party Chancellery, the Reich Minister for Party Affairs, the second person in the Reich - it was his eldest son, whose name was the same.

Here are some transcripts from our conversation (handwritten in the hotel room from that evening) in English, sometimes we would switch over to French with German inserts, which Eric would translate for me. The strongest feeling that gripped me then and, in fact, has not left until now, was and is a feeling of closeness of THAT war and THOSE people. All of those and all of that we know from feature films and from the old black-and-white chronicle, with its texture creating, as it turned out, a false sense of the remoteness of those events and the lives of those people. It felt like it all happened yesterday. Speaking to Bormann, mostly listening to him, this feeling I had inside of me only intensified. Not mentally, but by feeling. It arose suddenly, when having met him and already knowing who he was, I shook his hand and everything instantly became recent.

I decided to ask him carefully... "Did you have to shake hands with Hitler? His response was, "of course many times." He looked at me warily and he said, "I hope it doesn't cast a shadow on me now..." I looked down embarrassed by my question and looked him in the face and said "of course not".

I felt like I should not have asked that question and was now asking him to forgive me for this instinctive question. He somehow could sense exactly how I was feeling and smiled kindly at me. Nevertheless, the fact that only one palm (!) separated me from an unimaginable handshake made a physically strong impression on me. Martin said: "Hitler was my godfather. Can you imagine my attitude to this, considering that I later was a priest for a long time?".

"No, I can't even imagine how you feel," I admitted dazedly. To that, he nodded silently. Martin Bormann Jr, was a doctor. He worked in Africa for a number of years, he was a Catholic priest and a missionary. He treated people, reading sermons to them, and tried to morally help them.

He said, many times he had been advised to change his surname. Aber...

"But I didn't think it was right. I thought to myself, this is my destiny, my cross, and I have to carry it out. My dad was a good father, caring and understanding. I love him like a father. At the same time, he like all Nazi leaders wasn't just a criminal. My father was a monster, and if he was on trial at Nuremberg, he would be more deserving of execution than Ribbentrop."

"Martin ", I said, thinking about what I had heard "how do you manage to divide him into "father" and "other" in your attitude towards your father? How do you combine your love for him with such a clear condemnation of him as a nazi criminal and, as you say, a monster?

- You know, first of all, monsters also take care of their children! He smiled mirthlessly. Secondly, you are simply too young. For me, this is a long-term issue. My father's crimes, the fact that he was one of those who sent thousands of people to their death with his signature, causes me a completely unambiguous attitude. And the fact that he was a loving father - this applies only to me and my brothers and sisters. What matters more my feelings or the death of millions of people.

Everything is clear here. When we see each other at rare family gatherings, we never drink to

him... how do you say it in English?... the kingdom of heaven. We drink only to our memory of him as a father and to the salvation of his soul, which I don't believe in.

For a while we walked in silence. A few cars drove past us quietly. A tram rang out. Passers - by walked past and towards. I thought how strange - they have no idea who this gray-haired man is, and what we are talking about. -You know, said Bormann, - all my life I tried to atone for the unimaginable sin of my father before the world. I don't think I made it. I don't think it's even possible. So... "He wiped at his wet eyes. "But I tried."

"You didn't have to," I wanted to say something kind to him. The son is not responsible for the father. -Oh no! He raised his head sharply. - How does, he answered. Morally. And the son for the father, and the father for the son.

What you said is made up to alleviate the guilt. *We are responsible for any person close to us.* I always say this in my sermons. Just by being close. Even for a friend. And everyone feels it, but not everyone takes the trouble to realize this and say it outloud. Ja-Ja Martin," Eric suddenly said in German. - "du hast absolut recht", - and, looking at me, shaking his hand in his direction. - He is absolutely right.

"We, the children of the leaders of the Third Reich, bear our cross," Martin continued. - The daughter of my friends Katrin Himmler, the granddaughter of Ernst, brother of Heinrich, she is a historian, political scientist. She did a lot to expose many of the Nazis who fled. She traveled a lot around the world. However, she also left her last name. Her research on the Himmler brothers provides a true picture of their family. This was a family of mental freaks.

Do you know what citizenship she took? -Switzerland? -Not. - USA? No, you won't guess. - Ja ja Eric said suddenly expressively raising his eyebrows without a smile. -Well let's say the most radical, - I dared, - Russia? Not!

"I give up", I confessed sincerely. - She is Israeli citizen. Her husband is a general in the Israeli army. For a second as I continued to walk slowly, I felt numb. - "Well, you know! I chuckled and almost laughed. - I can imagine the look on the faces of the border guards when she enters Israel, and they see her name!

- That's for sure! Martin didn't smile. Everyone knows this name there, but she left it on purpose so she would never forget her family's past. I stopped grinning and then realized that my humor, no matter how funny, was not appropriate. -Ja-Ja! - with the same eccentric expression confirmed by Eric.

"Gudrun, the daughter of Heinrich Himmler, who considers him great and innocent of anything, hates Catherine, hates Martin, hates me, she hates us all. Her soul is a mystery. -Eric fell silent and walked, looking ahead of him on the sidewalk.

-Martin- I dared to ask, "-sorry for the question, butwhat do you remember the most?"

"- You know I could tell how Hitler was a vegetarian, how he had dinners, how as a teenager I loved him and called him Uncle Adolf, I was named by two names, including Adolf in his honor. I

don't use this name, as he taught me to draw, and how I liked it, but I didn't like his large nose when he leaned next to me and explained how to apply watercolor strokes, but what a soft and mesmerizing voice he had. And how horrified I was when I found out the truth about him, about my father, about everything... I could tell a lot, but none of that matters".

-You're wrong, I tried to argue - it does matter. "No" he replied calmly "it doesn't". What matters is the case, which was already after the war. I had already taken to becoming a priest, but there are moral situations that even a priest has no answers to. This is a case that I have talked about many times in interviews and on television as well.

People came to me, I listened to their confessions and tried to help them and inspire them. Once a former Wehrmacht soldier came to me. He said that during the uprising in Warsaw he was among those who cleared the cellars from the rebels. There was a little girl who was about five or six years old, suddenly jumped out of one basement and ran.

She stumbled and fell not far from this soldier. He wanted to pick her up and save her, but suddenly he heard the cry of the chief lieutenant: "Klaus! Poke this creature with a bayonet!" And he, obeying the order he pierced her with a bayonet in the chest. She didn't scream, she suffocated, everything happened within seconds. Breathless, she looked at him and it was at that moment he realized he had done something unimaginable. With which he could not live and he snatched the bayonet from her body. After that the Oberleutenant to kill him.

He found him a couple of minutes later, lying wounded from automatic fire from the windows. And instead of this officer's rescue, which was due according to the instructions he hit him several times with the bayonet. His confession came twenty years after the war, but since then, this ex-soldier-turned- postal clerk had never married or had children.

According to him, he could not look in the eyes of any children. A lot of time passed and he lived with that memory. He said, "G-d won't forgive me, I can't imagine what will happen to me for what I have done." Even as a priest I didn't know what to say to him. A week after coming to see me, this man hung himself. I'm afraid to say it, but he probably did the right thing. I am probably the wrong priest.

We walked in silence for a few seconds. -No, - I dared to say, - I think you are the right priest. Bormann looked at me with an almost hopeless look, at the same time filled with a certain hope.

-You understand, - he continued - this is not only a real story, but also a metaphorical one. That's how most people are. Then they will understand everything. Even now they understand, but at the moment when the life and fate of other people depend on them, they obey the order.

They obey the idea. You have to be a whole person and constantly think about what you are doing and most importantly, not be afraid to be yourself, not be afraid to resist orders, so as not to do something monstrous at a critical moment. -So, what, - I decided to ask, - do you think he is forgiven?

-Yes. Bormann looked at me in surprise. -He's forgiven. -How? He didn't kill on purpose. He did it out of the inertia to carry out an order and that was why he suffered so much. Neither Himmler, nor Goebbels, nor my father would have suffered from such a trifle as a murdered girl.

An unpleasant picture, - he made an elastic gesture with his psalm in the air, - but it didn't cause either physical or ideological discomfort. The girl was also Jewish, although I am sure he cut the air in front of him with his hand - that in their hearts they all understood that this was contrary to nature, that it was criminal, and that they would have to pay for it. I am sure they were aware of this.

The soldier was a Nazi purely formally and in the end he punished himself. Therefore, he is forgiven. -Nien-nien, Martin! - Eric suddenly spoke again in German and shook his head negatively in small movements.

-I disagree, to forgive means to remove the event. He cannot be forgiven, here I agree with the Jews and believing Jews.

Our Christian "forgiveness", thanks to which Christianity conquered half the world, has corrupted everyone! Repent and you will be forgiven! This is deceit! That's impossible. I'm sure Judaism is closer to the truth.

It is like this: everything that you have done regardless of your repentance, remains with you forever. Beat at least your forehead against the wall and assure you the sincerity of your repentance- nothing will change. Repentance is important. It defines you in your moral movement, but it does not remove the events and does not remove your guilt. And we Christians, are comfortable! We are betrayed, repented, and as good as new!

- Eric! Bormann exhaled indignantly. "To speak like that is a great sin! Repentance is not just words, it is awareness and suffering! Suffering of the soul and often of the body! Man needs a revival! That's right this is exactly what Christianity has conquered almost the whole world, because it is this unique opportunity that the Lord has given us.

Martin flushed with emotion and smoothed his hair. -You see Kotya"- Eric suddenly called me a childhood nickname and nodding towards Martin, said sarcastically, - the Lord gave them! I love these children! Eric looked ironically at Bormann, who patiently accepted his gaze.

"He's a Catholic," Eric shook his hand again in Martin's direction, and then poked his chest with his index finger. - I'm a Protestant. Basically Jewish. However, I am not a believer, but most importantly he is younger than me. When I was younger, that was a big difference. Even now you see he is still not mature enough to understand something!

Martin, pursing his lips, seemed to look at him with regret. Eric, leaned slightly in my direction, reached out behind me and patted Martin on the shoulder. He smiled. They almost hugged behind my back. I'll just tell you what, - Bormann looked at me.

- Never believe if someone who is German or from Germany says that he did not understand something. It is a lie. Everyone understood perfectly. -Ja ja, -Eric again shook his hand in front of him, - here he is right! -People lie to look morally innocent.

- Saying this, Martin tilted his head to one side becoming like some biblical character from the paintings of the Renaissance. - For the sake of feeling their own innocence, for the sake of feeling their rightness, people lie to themselves and believe in their own lies. I am afraid that in their mass, if not in the main, people are not rational and not moral.

They tend to create idols for themselves” he took a deep breath and continued. -In Nazism and Stalinism and in the North Korean ideology, in any totalitarian idea there is a lot of attractiveness. People are afraid of the diversity and complexity of life. Such an ideology creates the impression that it explains everything and answers all questions. People pretend to believe in all of this to such an extent that they convince themselves of this. It is madness, but unambiguity attracts, madness captures, it is contagious.