
Narsis Melikian, Retired Mining Engineer



Narsis Melikian: I was born in this city in 1921, in this very house. At seven, I went to school and finished it here in the city. When I was in the ninth form I joined the Young Communist League. After school I was drafted into the army. I served in an artillery division near Moscow. That's where I was when the war began. I stood as a sentry when Germans began to drop bombs on our cities. The army contained people of different educational levels. Graduates of the ten-year schools like me were sent to the Gorky [now, as before 1932, Nizhni-Novgorod] anti-aircraft artillery school. We studied for nine months at the military school and received the rank of second lieutenant. There were no shoulder boards yet in the army, and we wore rank insignia on our collars.

Right after graduation we were sent to the army near Moscow. That winter was a very hard time for Moscow. I was a platoon commander. We had four artillery pieces. We went to Podolsk and then to Maloiaroslavets [both on the southern approaches to Moscow] where soldiers began to put into practice what they had learned. So I was in battle for the first time at Maloiaroslavets as a platoon commander. We didn't stay in that town very long. We were shooting against tanks and destroyed a few. We had no time to count them. I was injured there and was sent to a hospital in Ivanovo [180 miles northeast of Moscow]. I recuperated in the hospital for a month and a half and then I was sent to the front again. I served in the anti-aircraft artillery. Soon, we were transferred to Gorky where a big attack on the city occurred. It was heavily bombed by six or seven hundred aircraft. The Germans dropped bombs on the Gorky car plant where tanks were being repaired.¹ We shot down many aircraft using so-called barrage fire. After that battle we advanced through Latvia, Lithuania, Revel [Tallinn], and all the way up to Koenigsberg [Kaliningrad]. That's where I finished the war.

Q: *What was the situation here in the city in 1946 when you came back after the war?*

NM: There was nothing here. The whole city was destroyed.

Q: *And your house too?*

NM: And my house too. All the city was destroyed.

Q: *Was your mother still here?*

NM: Yes, she was. The front part of the house was not destroyed. Germans lived in my house, and mother cleaned for them.

Q: *How did she live during the war?*

NM: She lived badly, as you can understand. It was a very hard time. One could eat only as much as one could earn.

Q: *Where did she get food?*

NM: She worked for food, exchanged her gold rings and other jewelry for food in the market place. She spent everything she had, but she survived—cold, hungry, but she worked. My father died in 1938. He was very sick, he worked in a bakery. It was a hard job. My mother was left alone. She had three children. I was the second.

My older brother went to Novosibirsk. He worked there as a chief engineer in a factory. He didn't become the chief engineer right away, of course. First he worked as a foreman in a workshop. He was not drafted into the army because he worked at a military plant.

Q: *And your younger brother?*

NM: My younger brother, born in 1924, stayed here with our mother. He was too young to be recruited into the army, so he stayed here and suffered together with my mother. It was very hard for him. As soon as Donetsk was liberated, he immediately went to the military committee and was drafted into the army. In two or three months, as my mother told me, she got a notice that he had been reported missing. We never heard from him again. We looked for him, wrote letters, but never found anything. As for me, I began to work at the Trudov Mine when I came back to the city.

Q: *Who hired you?*

NM: My childhood friend was working there. He graduated from the Mining Institute and began to work as chief engineer at first, and then as the director of the mine. He's the one who called me to work there. And I went to the mine. I did different jobs. My main duty was to provide the supply of equipment, materials, and spare parts. Officially my title was mining foreman, but I was responsible for the procurement of everything for the face. In the past there had been no such employee who was responsible for procurement.

Q: *What equipment did the mine have at that time?*

NM: We had coal hammers, pick-axes, some spare parts for cutting machines, and different bearings.

Q: *Were you already using cutting machines?*

NM: Yes, we were. We had the first cutting machines, called Donbass-1 and Donbass-2.

Q: *How long was the working day?*

NM: I began work at 6 A.M. and came home about 10 or 11 P.M.

Q: *How many years did you work as a mining foreman?*

NM: For three or four years. Then I became an assistant to the director of the mine. In fact, there was a break in my work at that mine. I was transferred to the southern Donbass where I worked as the deputy director and chief economist. Then I came back to my mine and later retired. I have worked here practically all my life, except for when I was sent to Moscow in the 1950s to study in the Higher School of the Trade Union Movement.

Q: *How many years did you study there?*

NM: For five years. I graduated in 1957 as a labor economist.

Q: *Who sent you to study?*

NM: The trade union.

Q: *How did they decide who was to be sent to study?*

NM: They chose people who were educated, energetic and capable. There weren't many such people after the war. Studying was interrupted by the war, especially for men. There were few

specialists, and those who had ten years of education were sent for further study.

Q: *You said that mainly men were sent to study?*

NM: No, women too. The situation was hard. We had to rebuild the mines, which were filled with water and had caved in. Women stopped working in mines only later, and now women are not permitted to work in mines at all.²

Q: *Did the mines begin to reopen earlier than the steel works?*

NM: No, they began to work at the same time. Both mines and the steel-works were reconstructed at the same time.

Q: *And the city was being rebuilt?*

NM: Builders were building the city, miners were producing coal, steel-workers were making steel. Everything was being done at the same time. It was called a "shock" [high priority] construction site. We had competitions and challenge banners. Our mine was the first to win the title, Mine of Communist Labor.

Q: *Were there eating facilities at the mine? Did you eat there?*

NM: We had a cafeteria. There was also a department of food supply [ORS] for the workers. This department had a farm where they raised pigs and calves, so we had meat. It was far in the steppe. Each mine had its own small farm. Then they began to open kindergartens, homes for invalids, and cafeterias for workers. And they chose very good cooks who prepared food that was really tasty. These cooks made a real Ukrainian borscht with dumplings and garlic. They also cooked pancakes, cabbage patties, and potato patties. When I remember how they cooked, I wish I could eat it now.

Our food supply was adequate. First of all, we provided coal to the collective farms and they provided us food. And secondly, all miners went to collective farms during the harvesting season and for that we received food for our cafeteria. That is how food was provided.

Q: *Did you have a permanent connection with collective farms?*

NM: Yes, but our mine also had its own farm. And anyone who lived in a separate house was allowed to raise pigs and cows. Every miner who lived in a village had a couple of pigs. As for hens, I keep them even here. It helps a lot. I can tell you that if it continued, if Khrushchev hadn't forbidden workers to have farms, the food situation would have been much better. Khrushchev confiscated all animals and left us with nothing. Recently, we have begun to rediscover farming again, but it's more difficult now. A generation has grown up that doesn't know how to tend to animals. Now

with perestroika, we hope that everything will get better step by step. We are happy that M.S. Gorbachev, who takes care of people's needs, came to power.

Q: *Do you also have a dacha?*

NM: Yes, I do. I grow cherries, strawberries, raspberries, and pears there.

Q: *Where is it?*

NM: It is at Karavannaia, seventeen kilometers from here. This is my garage and here is my Zaporozhets [small two-cylinder car manufactured in the Ukrainian city by that name]. If I had a bigger car, I would take you there. The air is very fresh at the dacha.

Q: *How long have you had your dacha?*

NM: Since 1962. A *sovnarkhoz* was located there.³ Keterich was the deputy chairman. He organized these dachas and divided plots of land. At first I didn't want to have a dacha. I didn't know how good it was, but he convinced me. He planted a nut tree in my garden which still grows. This nut tree is the biggest among all our dachas. At first I collected a bucket of nuts from this tree, then two buckets. Now I collect a sack and sometimes even two sacks. Let me give you some nuts. Taste one. Good, isn't it? These are my hens; grandmother [Narsis' wife] looks after them. We don't have to buy eggs and we eat chicken.

Q: *I want to go back to an earlier time. Do you remember the day Stalin died?*

NM: Yes, I remember. I've kept all the newspapers. It was in 1953. Everyone was in mourning and many people were crying. We couldn't imagine how we could live without Stalin but we managed all right. At the 23rd Party Congress, Khrushchev spoke and revealed what had happened under the rule of Stalin.⁴ It was difficult to understand at first. We couldn't understand why a tyrant had been ruling the country for thirty years. Then actual facts were presented; people who suffered because of him began to speak. We understood what the "cult of personality" was and what damage Stalin had done to agriculture, industry, and the sciences. He killed all the outstanding generals on the eve of the war: Bliukher, Tukhachevsky, Yakir, and many others. All in all, he did a lot of damage.

Q: *Where did you first hear Khrushchev's speech?*

NM: Khrushchev's speech was read to us at closed party meetings. I was already a party member by that time. In our party organization at the mine we read and discussed Khrushchev's speech. A letter was read which was addressed only to party members, from

which we got to know the damage Stalin had done to the country. He was condemned for it all.

As for Khrushchev, at first he wasn't bad, but then he also began to do foolish things and to make mistakes. Then he was quietly replaced and Brezhnev was appointed [General Secretary of the Communist Party]. He was not a successful leader and did nothing for the people. This is what is now called the period of stagnation. The rest you know. We had Andropov, then Chernenko, and now Gorbachev. This is where the happiest life of the Soviet people began. Perestroika. People suddenly felt themselves free; they could say whatever they wanted. But now we have economic difficulties. Still, I have confidence in the Congress of People's Deputies. They are now solving problems which are of vital importance to the Soviet people...food, living standards, and industry. Everyone closely follows the deliberations and decisions of the Congress.⁵

Our life now cannot be compared with the past. Gorbachev spoke yesterday on television and explained that the international position of the Soviet Union is very strong. Relations with the United States are improving. Who could imagine that I would have Americans in my place and talk with them? It was impossible under Stalin. You are the same people as we are. My granddaughter says to me, "Grandpa, take their address please, I want to write a letter to some girls in America. I want to make friends."

Q: *So everything has turned out all right?*

NM: I'll tell you what disturbs me. I am concerned about drug addicts, the young people I watch on television. It's painful to see them. From where does it come? I mean drug addicts and other such defects among youth. I take it to heart. We were also young. When I was twenty-one, I was a battery commander in the war. Could I think of drugs and drinking? My God, we never had it. And now all these dances. They dance such dances, maybe it's good for them, maybe they like them. I don't understand rock, what's good in it. People can dance the tango or waltz. I also danced these dances when I was young. But I don't understand rock-and-roll. What is it? I don't get it. I don't like it.

Notes

1. Reference here is to the Gor'kii Automobile Factory (GAZ) which was destroyed in two weeks of aerial bombardment that began on June 4, 1943. The figure cited here of the number of aircraft involved in uncannily close to the 645

given in the official Soviet *Istoriia Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny Sovetskogo Soiuz a v shesti tomakh* (Moscow, 1961–65), vol. 3, p. 394.

2. In 1958, women were banned from working underground at jobs that were “especially injurious” to their health.

3. *Sovnarkhozy* (regional economic councils) were introduced by Khrushchev in 1957 to achieve more rational use of resources and eliminate competition among industrial ministries. They were abolished in 1965.

4. Melikian misstates the Congress. It was at the 20th Party Congress in February 1956 that Khrushchev delivered his “secret speech” denouncing the “cult of personality” surrounding Stalin.

5. The First Congress of People’s Deputies met in May–June 1989. Its daily televised sessions were watched by a huge audience, estimated at over one hundred million people.