

Zella-Mehlis – Papa Fritz and Mama Elsa

NARRATOR

In 1942, the fifteen-year-old Ukrainian girls Lida Deinela and Anna Burlaka were abducted from Solontonoschka and taken to Zella-Mehlis. They were deployed to perform forced labor at the *Präzisionswerkzeug- und Maschinenfabrik Röhm* (Röhm Precision Tool and Machine Factory). They were housed in the city's largest camp, located at Beckerwiese.

Anna Burlaka later recalled:

ANNA BURLAKA

It was in October 1942 that I, along with other Ukrainian girls, was deported to Zella-Mehlis. We were marched to work under guard until the summer of 1943. We were forced to work from 6:00 in the morning until 7:00 in the evening. Our only food consisted of a thin vegetable soup and, twice a week, one kilogram of bread.

NARRATOR

About a year after their abduction, the girls made the acquaintance of a family from Zella-Mehlis. Within a short time, a close bond developed from this encounter.

ANNA BURLAKA

In the summer of 1943, when we were permitted to leave the camp and go into the town, we would venture out on Sundays, hoping to find work somewhere so we could earn a piece of bread. But no one would give work.

We returned with heavy hearts. We walked along the road that ran along the edge of the forest. Outside a house—which, as it later turned out, belonged to Fritz Wolf—we saw a woman. We asked her for work as well. She looked at us, then called out to her husband. He invited us inside. We were astonished when he led us into the living room and seated us at the table, where his entire family was gathered. They gave us food to eat. We were even more

astonished when Comrade Fritz Wolf told us that we should come back again for lunch—and to help fetch wood from the forest.

NARRATOR

The Wolf family became a surrogate family for Anna and Lida, and they came to visit every Sunday. In 1943, the now sixteen-year-old Anna Burlaka wrote a letter to the Wolf family from the camp:

ANNA BURLAKA

I was brought to this foreign land; by a cursed fate, I have been banished to Zella-Mehlis—as if into a cage of the dead, set between high, dark mountains. Thus was my young life destroyed, severed from my birth mother. Yet now, here in Zella-Mehlis, I have met a second mother—one who empathizes with me, shows me kindness, and treats me as her own daughter. (...)

NARRATOR

The Wolf family had been known to be Communists since the era of the Weimar Republic. As a result, they were repeatedly subjected to harassment during the Nazi era. Fritz Wolf was particularly targeted. Although he was spared from the initial major waves of arrests to which many of his political comrades fell victim, he was repeatedly issued arbitrary professional bans. He circumvented these restrictions by scraping by on odd jobs.

Despite the difficult circumstances, Fritz Wolf continued to participate in the communist resistance. He was part of the network of the Neubauer-Poser Group, which was active primarily in Thuringia, but also beyond its borders. The group distributed leaflets and informational pamphlets.

ANNA BURLAKA

Later, Fritz introduced us to his friends. There, we listened to Radio Moscow, and this brought us great joy. We realized that Fritz Wolf and his friends belonged to an underground organization. The members of this organization

helped the families of those imprisoned by the Gestapo. It also helped us—those who had been deported from the Soviet Union.

NARRATOR

From November 1943 onwards, Lida Deinela and Anna Burlaka themselves became integrated into the network of the Neubauer-Poser Group. In the forced labor camp, they explained front-line reports, translated radio broadcasts, and distributed leaflets:

LEAFLET

The war against the USSR has been dragging on for three years! Torrents of blood have flowed on both sides, and the peoples are suffering under this unprecedented war, which was unleashed by German fascism. (...)

Always bear in mind that you, as workers in the armaments industry (...), are being forced to act against your socialist homeland! Therefore, you must strive to do as little work as possible. (...)

The revolutionary working class of Germany feels fraternally bound to all (...) workers. Wherever we can offer resistance to the fascists, we shall do so together! (...) Proletarians of all countries, unite!

NARRATOR

In 1944, Fritz Wolf was denounced and arrested by the Gestapo for his work in the resistance. There appears to be no connection between this arrest and his contact with the Ukrainian girls. Fritz Wolf was interned in the Untermaßfeld penitentiary.

When Anna and Lida learned of his arrest, they attempted to raise money within the forced labor camp. The dynamic had shifted: Anna and Lida, who had previously relied on help from the Wolf family, now became their supporters.

In April 1945, American troops finally occupied Zella-Mehlis and liberated the camp. Around the same time, Fritz Wolf returned; he had managed to escape during a transfer from Untermaßfeld and make his way back to Zella-Mehlis.

ANNA BURLAKA

When F. Wolf returned, he was severely emaciated; he could barely stand on his feet. Nothing but bones. Yet, despite this, he immediately set to work for a new Germany.

NARRATOR

On May 1st, the liberated forced laborers organized a celebration at the Beckerwiese. The Wolf family was also invited. Shortly after the celebration, Lida and Anna returned to their homeland.

ANNA BURLAKA

Saying goodbye to the Wolf family was very difficult for us.

NARRATOR

Many years later, the newspaper *Freies Wort* in the GDR published an article by Fritz Wolf, in which he also told the story of Anna and Lida. In 1967, the Soviet newspaper *Krymskaya Pravda* picked up the story. Anna, too, read the report.

On April 2, 1968, she wrote to the Wolf family:

ANNA BURLAKA

Greetings to you, my unforgettable friends, whom I have always called Papa Fritz, Mama Elsa, and Sister Karla.

I am very glad that, even to this day, you have not forgotten us. Dearest Papa, please let me know how you are doing, and also how Mama is. Who among your Party group is still alive?

Of course, Germany devoured my health entirely. But otherwise, our lives are very good.

NARRATOR

Due to a chronic illness, Anna Burlaka was no longer able to travel to Zella-Mehlis, but Lida was able to visit the GDR in 1969.

She reunited with the Wolf family at a press festival hosted by the newspaper *Freies Wort*. This moment is captured in a photograph of Fritz and Lida embracing warmly.