FROM A DISTANT LAND TO MY NATIVE UKRAINE

Letters of the forced laborer Hanna Pastukh

by Daria Reznyk

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Photo credit: Hanna Pastukh (left) with another forced laborer, Gelsenkirchen, 1942-1943. pastukh_ost067 / After Silence, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

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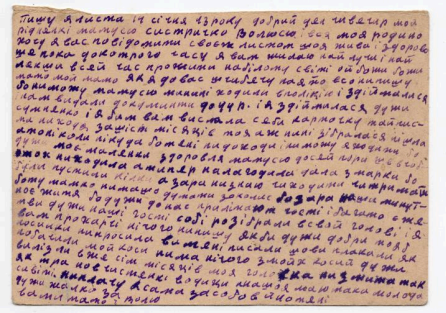
The letters of Hanna Pastukh represent the plight of a young woman who was taken from her native
Ukraine in 1943 and forced to work as a laborer in Germany until1945. Through writing letters, she tried to maintain a connection to her home and family.

By 1944, almost eight million people were working for the German Reich as forced laborers. More than two million of them were from the territory of today´s Ukraine – some taken to Germany by force, others having gone there voluntarily, believing German propaganda about a “happy and well-fed life” in contrast to the harsh conditions in occupied Ukraine. The stories of Ukrainian workers have been kept silent for a long time – in the Soviet Union, they were considered traitors who worked for the enemy. Even today, in museums and on the many monuments dedicated to the victims of Nazism, we find information about Soviet or Russian victims that somehow generalize the experience of the Soviet republics. This situation has been changing, however, since the 90s, at the levels of official policy and memorial culture from both the German and Ukrainian sides. Regional initiatives have played a significant role here, bringing to light the stories of forced laborers, the conditions in which they found themselves in Nazi Germany, and their subsequent fates. One of these initiatives – the Ukrainian NGO After Silence ↗, founded in 2021, works with letters forced laborers wrote to their families, which is one of the substantial sources of information available to us. In and between the lines of their letters, we can come to understand what life in Germany was like for these workers, and catch glimpses of their hopes and fears.

Dear Mum, we went to the police today and were photographed. We were given papers dating until 1944. I look sad in the photo. […]

You wrote that you cried when you saw my braids. Nothing is left of my hair; it has fallen out. My head has not been washed in clear water for seven months. Why do I have to have grey hair so young?

Übersetzer:innen: Claudia Dathe, Susanne Macht and Nelia Vakhovska



Postcard from Hannah Pastukh dated January 14, 1943 to her mother (front page). pastuch_ost010 / After Silence, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Hanna Pastukh was only 16 when she found herself in Gelsenkirchen´s glass and mirror manufactory, Glas- und Spiegelmanufaktur AG, along with other female workers from Ukraine's Kamianets-Podilskyi region, aged between 16 and 28. She lived in a camp for foreign workers (Ausländer-Gemeinschaftslager G.S.M.) at a factory from 1942 to 1945 and was released when the US Army entered Gelsenkirchen. In October 2022, the NGO After Silence discovered at least 22 letters from Hanna to her mother which can help us to find out more about her life in Gelsenkirchen.

One of Hanna Pastukh's letters. pastuch_ost055 / After Silence,CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Hanna came from the small village of Cykova – today part of the Chmel'nyc'kyj region – with a population of only about 960 people. She did not get a proper education: she completed

only two grades at school and worked as a farm laborer together with her mother, Lykera, and sister Olha. There is no information about Hanna´s father. In 1941, the whole Chmel'nyc'kyj region was occupied by German troops and Germany started a massive propaganda campaign to encourage the local population to voluntarily leave Ukraine and work for the Reich´s economy. It is known that the local newspaper "Podolyanin" published calls for people to go to work in Germany; they promised good food supplies, free housing, and free correspondence with relatives. It is unknown how many village residents went voluntarily – however, after a while, due to the insufficient number of workers, the German occupation authorities began to take people against their will. As a result, Ukrainian villagers ended up in different parts of Germany. One of these groups was in Bielefeld. Among the forced laborers there was Hannah's uncle, Fanas Zhovtonoga with whom Hanna corresponded during the whole of her time in Germany. In total, as of July 1943, there were 5,450 workers from occupied Eastern Europe working in Gelsenkirchen; 146 forced laborers worked at the glass and mirror manufactory, of whom at least 13 were minors aged 13-15 years. 16-year-old Hannah was the only girl from her village – alone, far from home, and forced to do hard and dangerous work.

Letters were the only way for Hanna to keep in touch with her family. Like other forced workers, she was allowed to write only two letters per month, despite promises made by German propaganda that it would be possible to correspond regularly with family in Ukraine. Her letters were censored, which is indicated by the stamps on each one. Interestingly, Hanna knew about this and devised various methods to avoid censorship. Sometimes she used allusions or euphemisms to make the meaning understandable only to her mother. In her letter from March 31, 1943, Hanna wrote:

"I cannot even describe my young happy life here (...) Why wasn't I gone like Yulia? I would know then at least that I am near my mother" - here she was referring to the death of her younger sister Yulia in Ukraine, whose grave was in her native village.

"If only letters would arrive, but they don't because of the foreign visitors (чужі гості)" - wrote she on December 14, 1943. For sure, she was witnessing the Allied bombing of Gelsenkirchen, but she could not describe it directly. She called the bombs "foreign visitors" so that the person who checked the letters would not understand what she was writing about.

Describing her life, Hanna often asked her mother for food or tobacco from Ukraine:

"Mummy, can you send me a parcel of grain, and plums, nuts, if you can. If you have some, send me bread as well" – from the letter of October 18, 1942.

“Mother, if you can, send me a parcel of grain” – December 11, 1942.

Workers could receive parcels from home – up to 250 grams each, but it is unknown how much of the food was delivered without it spoiling on the way. Tobacco was in short supply, so the “Ostarbeiter” (Eastern European laborers) would pass it on to the local Germans in exchange for food. The diet, in general, was quite poor – the norm for Ostarbeiter was 2,283 calories per day, the lowest amount among the workers.

“I am not telling you anything about the food here. If it were enough, I would not ask you for more." – wrote Hanna on January 14, 1943. In April, her uncle Fanas wrote a letter to Hanna's mother, telling her he had sent Hanna 2 kilograms of grain from Bielefeld, where he worked. He said he did not have much food either, but that he would try to send Hanna more. “When we return home, we will live like we used to live, we will not forget each other.”

Poor nutrition combined with harsh conditions and constant hard labor affected Hanna's health, which she mentioned in her letters: “There is nothing left of my braids. I haven't been able to wash my hair properly for 7 months” – January 14, 1943.

> *I can't even wash [my clothes] because I don't have any soap and you can't buy it. For six months, we were given a pair of underpants and an undershirt, and when I picked them up, I sang with joy. If I were at home, I wouldn't be able to decide which skirt to wear [because I would have so many], and here I feel so happy [with so little].*
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> ***Übersetzer:innen: Claudia Dathe, Susanne Macht and Nelia Vakhovska***

Postcard from Hannah Pastukh dated December 26, 1942 to her mother (backside). pasthuch_ost053 / After Silence, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

The mortality rate among Ostarbeiter was one of the highest across all categories of workers

– approximately 1,210 people died every month from tuberculosis, work-related injuries, typhus, etc. Hanna did not mention whether she was ill, but it is known that in December 1942 she spent a week in a local hospital: “Mom, you ask me how my health is. My hands hurt, my legs hurt, my teeth and head hurt. My health is very poor” – December 26, 1942.

Holidays provided her with a chance to break away from the tough routine of everyday work life. In a letter dated December 1942, Hanna talked about celebrating Christmas with the Germans:

> *Dear Mum, we celebrated Christmas yesterday. A Christmas Eve was organised for us Ukrainians; we celebrated the birth of Christ. Our masters, our superiors, did not avoid us; they were as kind to us as they could and helped us as much as they could. They told us that when the war was over, we would go home, but now we cannot because the war is continuing. They understand how difficult the situation is for us. Dear Mum and dear Olya, on Christmas Eve, we had no reason to be angry; they gave us good food, lots of white bread, coffee, soup, sausages and a bottle of wine. So that was my Christmas Eve, Mum.*
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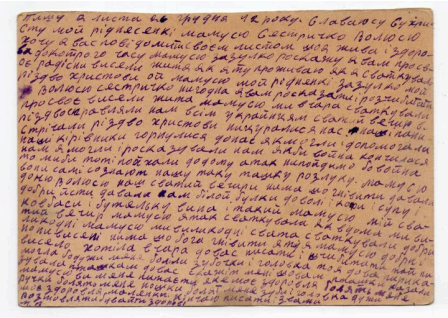
> *Übersetzer.innen: Claudia Dathe, Susanne Macht and Nelia Vakhovska*



Postcard from Hannah Pastukh dated December 26, 1942 to her mother (front page). pastukh_ost054 / After Silence, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Given the usual meagre food, Hanna rejoices in the festive treat: “We had nothing to complain about. They gave us good food, they gave us plenty of white bread, and coffee, and soup, and sausages, and a bottle of wine. And that was my Christmas Eve, mommy”.

One of Hanna Pastukh's letters. pastuch_ost055 / After Silence,CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Dear Mummy, dear Olya, I can hardly describe my young and happy life to you. I tweet to you about where I am going and what I am doing. I let the birds sing about me; the wild winds tell you about me. Why didn't you let me go away like Sjanka Julka? Then I would know that I am near my Mummy.

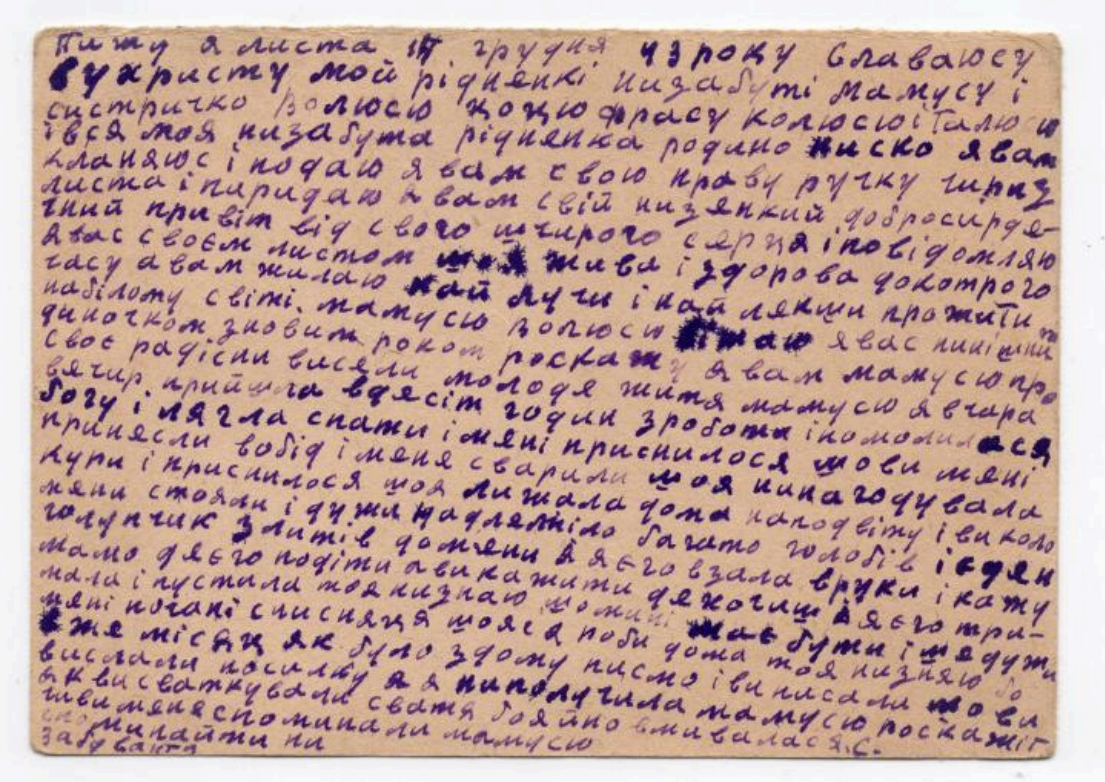
[...]

I cover my head with a white cloth and let the grey falcon tell my family my fate.

[...]

I pick a rose flower and throw it into the water: Swim, you, rose flower, to my family. The rose flower swam far and stopped on the bank. The mother came to fetch water and recognized the flower. Have you, Hanna, been ill for a year or two, that your flower has wilted in the water? Dear mother, I have not lain ill for a year, nor been ill for two years, I fell into evil hands and perished...

Übersetzer:innen: Claudia Dathe, Susanne Macht and Nelia Vakhovska



Postcard from Hannah Pastukh dated January 31, 1943 to her mother (front page).
pasthuch_ost016 / After Silence, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

One issue of enduring painfulness for Hanna was loneliness, which she mentions many times in her letters. “Do not forget me, for I am a poor orphan here” – she wrote to her mother on December 31, 1942.

Hanna’s life as a factory worker in Gelsenkirchen continued until 1945. However, in 1945, along with the rest of the workers, she was evacuated further from the front line – to Lünen. There Hanna met another worker from Ukraine, Mykola Burlaka, who was originally from the village of Rozumivka, in the Kirovohrad region. He was a year older than Hanna and had completed seven grades of school education. From July 8 to August 21, 1943, he worked at

the Victor-Ickern coal mine (Zeche Victor-Ickern) in the city of Castrop-Rauxel, and from August 24, 1943, to March 30, 1945 at the Victoria mine (Zeche Victoria) in Lünen. It is not known how exactly they met, but during the filtering process upon returning to Soviet Ukraine, Hanna's marital status was listed as "married". Their relationship became known later through correspondence and stories from Mykola´s relatives. In 1945, Hannah returned to her native village, and Mykola went to work in Soviet Russia. A few years later, he returned to his native village and married another woman. In 1949, his daughter Hanna was born – probably named after Hanna Pastukh, “the first wife”. It is she who told us the story of Hanna Pastukh and Mykola Burlaka, having kept the only joint photo of the couple, taken in Lünen.

Mykola Burlaka and Hanna Pastukh, Lünen, 1945. pastuch_ost166 / After Silence,

Mykola Burlaka died in 1978. He and Hanna had never met again after 1945.

On April 2, 1945, the US army entered Gelsenkirchen and Hanna was released and transferred to the Soviet side. As mentioned above, she had to go through a Soviet “filtering” procedure, where she was checked for “reliability”. After returning, she worked at a kolkhoz in her native village. Hanna did not remarry and lived alone until her death in 1983.

Hanna´s story is in some ways a representation of the cruel destiny of many female forced laborers. Taken to Germany against their will, they suffered from hard work, malnutrition,

poor living conditions, and loneliness. Letters were the only connection with home, and represented their hope of returning home and that a family was waiting for them there. However, upon returning to the Soviet Union, many of these people were treated with suspicion and mistrust from the authorities, their neighbors, and fellow villagers. Ukrainian researcher Tatyana Pastushenko emphasizes that forced laborers were often considered "traitors who voluntarily helped the enemy." Even when undergoing Soviet filtering on their return, former workers had to answer many leading questions, including "Which Soviet citizens with whom you were in Germany do you know to be traitors to the Motherland?".

From January to February 2024, Hanna Pastuch´s story was presented in Gelsenkirchen, in the exhibition "Aus der Ferne in meine Ukraine. Briefe der Zwangsarbeiterin Hanna Pastuch aus Gelsenkirchen, 1942–1943". This exhibition, as well as ongoing research, has made an important contribution to research on the history of forced laborers in Germany by shedding light on their personal experiences and narratives. The exhibition took place from November 22, 2024 to December 14, 2024 at the University of Münster. A further stop of the exhibition is planned in Bochum in April.