

**Interview: Reina Pennington and Polina Vladimirovna Gel'man (Gelman)**

**Moscow, 3 May 1993, Gel'man's home**

*This interview has been edited for clarity. Some repetitive statements and exchanges to clarify a word or location are omitted, for example, as well as intermittent small talk with the other family members. Text in italics is notes; text in brackets is clarification.*

PVG = Polina Vladimirovna Gel'man

RJP = Reina Pennington

VR = Vladimir Ravkin, who assisted me in Moscow

*Gel'man began by handing me a typed out copy of a chapter of a book that was written about her. (Sverdlov, F. D. V Stroi u Otvazhnykh: Ocherki O Evreiakh, Geroiakh Sovetskogo Soiuz a (В строю отважных: очерки о евреях, героях Советского Союза). Москва: А/О "Книга i biznes", 1992.*

PVG It talks about me, but there is also information about the flights. I wrote about the flights. Because those who don't fly, don't do it right. By the way, you wrote very well.

RJP Thank you.

*We exchanged small talk about Anne Noggle, who had recently interviewed the veterans. Her book, A Dance with Death, was not yet published at that time, but I had become friends with Anne and delivered a small gift from her to Gelman.*

RJP You've already told me a lot [in letters]. Maybe today we can talk about the details of everyday life during the war. What was your first operational base after Engels?

PVG After Engels, the first was at a small mining town called Trud Gorniaka in Ukraine. What was interesting was that where we lived there was some kind of agricultural plant. But there was no hotel or anything like that, so they set up our quarters in a stable. We called it "Hotel Flying Horse."

RJP What time of the year was it when you arrived?

PVG We got there on May 27, 1942. And that's where we received our first combat mission. The regimental commander and her navigator flew on the very first night we were there.

RJP That was Bershanskaia?

PVG Yes, Bershanskaia. On the second night, the two squadron commanders flew. It might interest you that we had only two squadrons. People died in battles, but we didn't want, we didn't want . . . we wanted to remain an all-female regiment. That is why during our free time from flying, we organized a kind of "academy," because we wanted to stay all female.

Beginning in 1942 or 1943, the Soviet army started to prepare junior specialists in aviation – technicians, motorists, and armorers. We had been training the navigators how to fly a plane during routine flights and some became pilots. Then we trained some of the new specialists, the girls who had some education, how to be navigators. And so it was that we went to war with two squadrons, but ended the war with four and one of them was a training squadron. But half of the training squadron were combat crews. So in all, there was the regimental commander's crew and ten crews in each squadron that flew. And we ended the war with four squadrons. That is, despite the combat losses. And between you and me, I tell you that the last battle we had was here, in Moscow, after the war. They wanted to give the regiment to men.

RJP Give the regimental number?

PVG Yes, the number, the banner. But we all said “No”. Either you leave us alone, or we will not give it to the men. And at the end we won. And you will probably see our banner on some pictures. Probably someone, somewhere has the pictures, our banner was given to the museum of Soviet Army. Now because of the disorder in our country, you probably noticed it, I don't know if there is anything left from our regiment, because everything that is Soviet is being destroyed now. But it's probably still there. There is a small exposition dedicated to our regiment, at the Museum of the Soviet Military Forces, on Commune Square I think, it's not very far. [renamed Suvorov Square in 1994] So that was how we remained an all-female regiment.

And as you pointed out in your article, our regiment was disciplined and very precise in completing out assignments. Our veteran's chairman said that she was in an archive, the archive of military forces in Podol'sk, and she found a report on 218<sup>th</sup> Division there, "A Report of the Conference of All Commanders of All Regiments of the Division." And at that meeting it was recorded in the minutes that of all the regiments of the division, the 46th Guards Regiment ranked first in combat work, in discipline, and in sanitary practices.

We flew around from place to place [rebased], but when we stopped, at the very first river, the first pool of water, we would do laundry right away, and would hang it on the planes to dry. So, in hygiene, in culture, in everything -- we took first place. We didn't drink, we didn't run after women --

RJP How about running after men?

PVG What are you saying? No, we didn't run after men. Our job was the most important thing for us. We were enthusiasts... No one sent us to the front.

RJP You are still enthusiastic!

PVG I want to tell you about my friends.

RJP Okay.

PVG At the end of the war an "illness" suddenly started in the regiment: everyone started doing embroidery. Somewhere they got needles, materials. As soon as they had a spare time, everyone was embroidering. Not me though. I always liked to read. So I read and they sewed. Ask Rakobol'skaia, she sewed also. By the way, Rakobol'skaia and I were in the same class year, but she was in the physics department when we left to go to front, and I was in the history department. We all were Komsomols, so we were responsible for the same job but she in physics department and I was in history.

RJP Did you know each other before the war?

PVG Yes, before the war, because we were responsible, in the University committee we got together because she was responsible for military and sports work, and I was responsible for the same thing but in my department.

Do you understand? When we were growing up, we had complete equality, before the war there was full equality between men and women. Both in school and in the Pioneers. Everyone including girls got to shoot, and jumped and ran and danced.

RJP Through Osoaviakhim?

PVG Yes, yes, Osoaviakhim. Of course, all of that was voluntary, but there wasn't even a slight hint to gender discrimination. We didn't have that kind of discrimination. That is why when the war started and they didn't accept us to the army, we felt absolutely offended. The war started in June. But they only admitted us into the army, they started to admit into the air regiments in October.

We went everywhere [trying to enlist]: I had already taken some nursing classes. And we went and dug the trenches, because the Germans were very close to Moscow. But of course, I was very happy to get into aviation because I had a very complicated relationship with aviation. Did you know about this?

RJP Yes, you wrote me about it.

PVG So, do you understand, that when we were in the 9th grade, we had 10 grades in all, we went to airclub. So I finished a school of gliders, and did a parachute jump. Then in the 10th grade we learned to fly a plane. We finished all the theoretical part but when we got to the airfield, the instructor told me "do a loop." I say, "I don't know how to." He says "Watch" and shows me: "you need to press the pedal all the way down." But you see, I was short ... So in order to do it, I had to slide way down [to reach the rudders]. He looks around--no cadet! [He couldn't even see the top of her head] You can't even imagine how much he cursed. He was afraid. And he said "don't come here again."

But we graduated from school that year. All of my friends were getting ready for the exams for institutes. I was among those who graduated with excellence, so I didn't have to take exams. But I cried the whole summer [about not getting fly].

I went to Moscow and applied to two institutes, to Moscow State University and to the Aviation Institute. And I was accepted to both institutes on the same day. First of all, I loved social sciences, and secondly, I had been so hurt by aviation, that I chose to go to the University, and it was the right decision.

But then, when they called me to aviation, I was very glad to go, because why I should study history when I can make history myself, you know?

So if you want, I don't want to prolong this, I am probably telling too many details.

RJP I'm not just writing a dissertation; I want to write a book. So I'm interested in all the details! To make history live you need these details.

PVG So we arrived at an aviation school, where there was normally a 3-year course. But the war was going on, and we could not afford to study for 3 years.

RJP Was that at Engels?

PVG Yes, in Engels. So we studied 12-13 hours a day in class every day, and the navigators studied one hour longer. We were woken up earlier and we learned the Morse code. So [the navigators studied] more than everyone else. In three months we were ready to go to the front. But during one of these training flights for practice bombing, three planes crashed and four dead bodies, four young women were killed, and the command delayed our departure to the front and made us do additional training. more training.

And suddenly a couple of months later. we were practicing the Morse code, and our instructor was a young guy. He would transmit, and we would write it down, and he would finish. His name was Petya. And two months later, one day he transmits "The order for your departure to the front has been received. Those who understand this are dismissed. Petya"

We got up and walked around. Everyone looks at us, what are they doing? Not everyone understood the Morse code.

This is what happened. This is for your book.

But overall, of course, it was difficult. The tension was very high, because we tried to be precise, to perform our duty precisely to complete the assignments. It demanded a lot of attention. That's what I want to want to tell you.

Usually in any war -- thank God America didn't experience a war like this-- during a war like that there is no country that could arm itself from border to border.

*[Gel'man's daughter entered: "Please excuse me dear scientific workers, maybe this is possible to do with tea? Let's have some tea."]*

PVG: Keep in mind that what I am telling you are my own conclusions: the most difficult, most difficult thing for aviation is to fly over the front lines 10-15 kilometers from the field, and in every square meter someone is shooting Especially our side. At that time, during the Second World War, the more modern planes of that time could cover that distance to the front line in 1, 2, 3 minutes.

But we, in our U-2, flew at 120 kilometers per hour -- that was called a cruising speed, but with bombs, no more than 100 kph. Sometimes a truck on the ground, a car, could go faster than we were going in the air. So it took us 10-15 minutes to cover that distance to the front line. And you can't turn either left nor right, they are shooting everywhere. You could not turn back because the target is in front of us.

You understand, you're bombing, the target is always covered by AAA. Either by fighters or AAA. You bomb, and then fly back over the front line again to go home, Refuel, rearm, and fly across the front line again, and this way five times, are you getting all this? 5 to 10 times every night. On long winter nights we made 15 trips one time, once even 17 times, but usually 5-10 sorties per night.

RJP Is that per aircraft or aircrew?

PVG Every crew had its own plane.

RJP Maybe the crews switched off sometimes?

PVG No, no, no. Everybody had their plane. And the whole war was like this, without

days off. Because that was required all the time, especially because there weren't that many night pilots. We served on the entire front and this is why we had no breaks. We had to do a lot.

So we talked about the planes. Why did we end up with U-2? It was a time when there was not enough equipment. Sometimes when we were finishing our work at dawn, male pilots who flew during the day were arriving on the field. They would say "Girls, how do you manage to fly on this bookshelf across the front line? I would never do it." It was a joke, of course. But at that time we didn't care about the plane [as long as we got to fly].

They called us witches. Well, if I had to fly on a broomstick during the war, I would still have gone!

RJP Did you like this name "The Night Witches"?

PVG The Germans called us that. I didn't care. Do you know how we found out? We were flying at night, not in formation, you can't fly together in the dark. We flew in carousel, using 3-4 minute spacing, one after another, and the reconnaissance reported that over there they were going crazy, they thought that it was only one plane, which bombed them over and over during the whole night!

But we have the carousel. By the time the last plane is bombing, the first one has already managed to land, refuel and return to the target.

So I don't know. We knew that they had given us a name. And when we went on the offensive in the Caucasus we started to arrive to the liberated areas. Women were telling us "Girls, how beautiful you are! We were told that you are not men or women, but just something in between and very awful!"

RJP Who told them that?

PVG The Germans. When we launched the offensive, Germans were still there, and they said that. But when we landed, people wondered "who are these girls? they even gather flowers." (Our airfields were always in open fields.) And they say, "But we were told that you are not men, but witches." We took it calmly, we didn't care. You know, Reina, we in our country were atheists. So it just seemed funny to us.

What else?

RJP I had something just a second ago . . . Do you know how many regiments were usually in a division or in an air army? Or in a front?

PVG Well in a front . . . that was secret. But the structure was like this: We were in divisions from 6 to 8 regiments, but in the army there are many divisions. Many divisions in the army. The structure was a regiment that consisted of squadrons and in each squadron were flights. We had for example: a regiment with squadrons, in each squadron three flights with three crews, and a squadron commander and crew. So a regiment consisted of 3 and more squadrons. There were different kinds of divisions with different aircraft. For example, in the 218th division that I told you about, there were 6 regiments and all of them used the U-2.

I would like to tell you something else, about an incident when the war ended, the commander of the 4th Air Army arrived

RJP Vershinin?

PVG Yes, Vershinin. He came to give us awards. He said, "You know girls, sometimes we felt so badly, we didn't want to send you [into combat]. When there was a strong anti-air defense, we felt badly, you are so young, we didn't want to send you. But I have an American Boston," he said. The Boston was a heavy bomber. We had "Bostons", "Spitfires", that was English, they were very shiny in the cockpits, everything was comfortable. But our people like to fly in our own planes better.

So Vershinin says: "I have a Boston. If it gets shot down it costs a million. But your dragonfly--only 25 thousand. So we had to send you."

He did not say this officially, but in a frank conversation. Don't give me away.

*It's not clear whether Gel'man was quoting Vershinin as saying "don't quote me" or if she was asking me not to attribute this story.*

PVG I want to tell you more, because many people will tell you about the heroic flights, but I will tell you about life.

RJP That's good, the books, and memoirs, they all tell about the flights. I'm interested in hearing your stories.

PVG So I want to tell you that when we first arrived at the front, later, in the division, I forgot the number of that division, our first division. The commander and commissar were eagerly waiting for a new regiment because very hard battles took place before that, and the losses were great.

And later on, after two weeks or a month, the commissar of the division told us that "we were waiting, and the regiment lands at the airfield, a field full of flowers. The pilots and the navigators jump out of their planes and start picking flowers. It was then they could see that these were girls.

RJP They didn't know?

PVG They didn't know, they say "oh, we must be very old because they sent kindergarten children to us! They send us kindergartners!" And they left and didn't come back for two weeks. But then, they started to get calls from the higher command, "How are things going, how are they fighting?" they started asking. So they were forced to come back. Later, when we began our work, they understood, he told us, how wrong they had been, how disciplined we were, and how the regiment had a true fighting spirit.

In 1943 the same thing happened after Stalingrad, when we were fighting to liberate Sevastopol'. At Stalingrad a U-2 Guards Division had performed very well.

In Sevastopol', there was our regiment and another regiment that had been fighting with us all the time, a brother regiment, we called them brothers. We were the only two regiments using U-2 in that division. So our two regiments were attached to that Stalingrad Division. We fought for a month for Sevastopol', it was liberated, that was the last bastion in Crimea.

But then Vershinin recalled our two regiments back to his Air Army, when our Army was in Belorussia, our two regiments. So General Kuznetsov, The commander of the Stalingrad division, said "take any regiment you like, but leave me the women's regiment." But we flew back to our old division.

RJP I read a story that when you flew to your first base, some fighter aircraft made an attack against you just to see how you would react. And you thought you were being attacked by German fighters.

*Gelman seems to have misunderstood my question -- she answers about their experiences at Sevastopol, a later time in the war.*

PVG No, it is not correct, the thing is we worked at night in Crimea and Sevastopol was very well fortified. There were many airplanes flying during the day and they knew that a women regiment was based there. So every pilot considered it his duty when he returned from a mission to circle above us, to "salute" us. We just wanted to sleep after the night work, but they kept making noise. Bershanskaia complained about it to Vershinin. And there was an Air Army order making the space above our regiment a restricted area, with a heavy punishment for violations. So they didn't fire at us on purpose to check us

What else would you like to know?

RJP Do you know about oral history? In oral history you conduct many interviews and record a person's whole life. We can't do that, but if we could do as much as we can that would be very interesting.

PVG You can read in this article that I am giving you, besides there is a book, I can't give it to you, because I have only one copy. It's in English.

RJP In English?

PVG Yes, I think it was published here. It was published by "Vostok;" it is a fiction department. The author and I were in the same class in the Military Institute.

RJP Did he serve in the VVS?

PVG No, he was a border guard. And I demobilized earlier and I was a major, but he demobilized way later, he was a lieutenant colonel.

VR After the war I taught foreign students in Spanish. And once there were no professors and I ended up with a group from Israel. One of them could speak Russian. Two spoke Hungarian and one spoke French. But I could talk to him in French. We had a seminar: one speaks Russian, I understands. The other one speaks French, which I could understand, but one speaks Hungarian, and I absolutely don't understand anything.

*Unfortunately I don't have a record of the title and author of the book. There was a long digression with discussion of her grandson, who very much liked a toy I had brought him, and many questions from Gelman about my family and especially my Spanish grandmother.*

PVG Were you able to talk to many people yesterday?

VR Yesterday we attended a dinner that was organized at the meeting of the 125th regiment, of course there was no time and place for the interviews, but at the end I talked to several women and we agreed that they will give interviews to Reina, and I wrote down when we are going to meet. Of course, it is difficult to do everything that Reina wanted in such a short period of time.

PVG Is the 125th a fighter regiment?

RJP The 125th are the dive bombers. The 586th is the fighter regiment.

*I found it quite interesting that Gelman didn't remember much about the other "women's" regiments, even though they all met in the same park for the May 9th reunions. Perhaps it was because the 125th was the Guards designation for the previously numbered 587th.*

*There was another digression as Gelman asked me more questions about my family and my previous travels in the Soviet era. She asked where I had been.*

RJP I was in Moscow, Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, in Irkutsk, and in Ulan Bator.

PVG Did you notice any difference between then and now?

RJP I've only been here for three days. Today I noticed that the people on the subway seemed a lot more open and happy than in the past, but maybe it's because of the holiday. But at the same time we heard about the incident yesterday when a policeman was killed.

PVG No, he is alive.

PVG *Indecipherable; a question about when I got to the park the day before?*

VR First we were where the 586th gathered, we got there at 11 o'clock, we spoke to them for a long time, and then we talked to you.

PVG When will Anna's book be published?

RJP Within the next year, I think.

PVG Is she your acquaintance or is she in charge of your work?

RJP Anne? No, not in charge, just my friend. I found out about her book, I visited her, met her, and now we are good friends.

PVG Lately, there has been a lot of interest in men pilots and women pilots in the world.

RJP It's because in America, there are debates right now about whether women should be in combat positions in the military.

*Conversation with Gelman's daughter? about whether I had a pension from the Air Force.*

PVG Due to the new laws, I decided to switch from a civil to a military pension. I served for 15 years, but one year during the war is equal to 3 years of service. This way I have 21 year of service, and I decided to switch to a military pension.

*More conversation about Gelman's daughter, her excellent cooking (she served us cake), and her scientific occupation.*

RJP Polina Vladimirovna, was the reunion yesterday different from previous years? It seems there weren't many people with flowers there.

PVG Well, flowers are very expensive now.

RJP Have you heard that Grizodubova passed away?

PVG Yes. The funeral will be tomorrow.

RJP Tomorrow? At what time?

PVG At 10 a.m.



*Discussion with my assistant about our schedule for the next day. We had an interview scheduled with Karakorskaia of the 586th for 10 am.*

RJP Polina Vladimirovna, do you the funeral will be interesting. Would it be interesting to see?

PVG Grizodubova was , and you know this, one of the first women pilots, and she was not only a Hero of the Soviet Union, but she was also a Hero of Socialist Labour. She was a commander of a regiment of heavy bombers that flew over Berlin during the war. She was a director of scientific research institute of aviation the war. And they were satisfied with her. She had a masculine kind of character, she could get what she wanted, and she was a significant person. And the main thing is that she helped many people. I met her during the war. She was a head of the committee of Soviet women. And then an international antifascist mass meeting was organized in Moscow. Bershanskaia, Smirnova, and went as representatives from our regiment. And Grizodubova received us there.

RJP When was this?

PVG In the summer of 1944. Let me look, I thing I have pictures. This is us, we were a crew, we received our first Orders, and this is our first Hero of the Soviet Union. And this is me.

RJP Your first pilot . . .

PVG Yes, my first pilot. This is in 1942. Before she died.

RJP Dusia Nosal'.

PVG Dusia Nosal'.

[showing new photo] This is June 2nd of 1945 in Berlin. This is me sitting here. What is interesting is that this is June 2nd of 1945, less than a month after the capitulation was signed in Berlin.

RJP Did you fly missions during the battle of Berlin?

PVG No, if this is Berlin, and here is south, and here is north, and here is Berlin, than we were here, more to the north. We were in Rokossovskiy's *front*, but Zhukov was the one to go to Berlin. And Konev was here. We were making sure the Germans could not get into our rear, and we were bombing their groupings.

RJP Was the fighting was severe in that area?

PVG It is known that the fighting was very severe in Berlin. But we didn't fly above Berlin.

RJP Can I ask one more question? One American wrote to me that he heard that womens' regiments were taken out of the real fighting in 1943, so they didn't do any real fighting between 43 and 45. I am looking for information that proves that that is wrong, that he is wrong.

PVG He lies. We received our last mission on May 8, 1945. We had an assigned mission and were sitting in our plane, waiting for the command to take off. Then suddenly the armors come up and they take the detonators out of the bombs. And they said to us, release the bombs. "Why? What happened?" "Capitulation! The war is over!" That was May 8th, 1945.

RJP So what did you do?

PVG We didn't do anything -- we were just sitting. We were young, after all. But there's excitement inside. You don't quite know but you need to switch now, you need to move on to a peacetime life.

My mother lived in Gomel' which was occupied, and that is why it was destroyed. My brother was with her. He was in the 9th grade, he grew up and volunteered for the military -- also in aviation, by the way. He is a professor now . . .

Anyway, you don't know where to go, where to return to. I knew I would return to the University, but it turned out that it was possible to stay in the army and study. So I studied at the University as an external student, and at the same time I studied in the Military Institute and was got a military salary.

I remember one more night when I was flying and I was crying the whole time. We were retreating from Ukraine to Caucasus. And we were bombing the advancing German columns of tanks. They were advancing so fast that we didn't have enough time to relocate. I remember we didn't even have maps. They just told us to fly on a course of 90 degrees, fly east.

And then, while we flew toward the target, our own people were burning the land, it was August or September, the end of harvest season, but there wasn't time to harvest so they burned it rather than leave it [for the Germans], and you know my tears flowed involuntarily because it's your own land burning, my own country was burning, it was terrible.

RJP What did you think when you were crying, and the Germans were advancing -- Did you ever think that you might lose the war?

PVG Us? Personally I never thought that we would lose. But I want to tell you that right at that time they read Stalin's order number 227 to us--

RJP Not one step back--

PVG Not one step back. We were standing in formation and there were tears, but at that time, I want to tell you, there was an episode. People often ask "What heroic deed did you do?" How do you answer that? I was just doing my job. I got shot at, but I was in a war. I shot too. I came back and there were holes in the plane. There were many things, but it was war. Did I want to die? I didn't want to die.

RJP Were you wounded? No, you know the plane was damaged, but maybe because I was small, I was only scratched, and my boot was torn apart.

But what I was afraid of the most, I didn't want to die of course, I wanted to live, but what I was afraid of the most was being captured alive. And this is what happened: I had a friend from school, we were friends since the 5th grade. Her name was Galya Dokutovich, she was Belorussian. We went to Moscow together. She was tall, shapely, and pretty. When I wasn't able to fly because of my height, she continued to fly. So when I heard that girls were recruited to the aviation, I immediately went to see her. She was getting ready to volunteer as well, we went there together.

RJP Was she the one who told you, when you were out digging ditches and you said you heard from your girlfriend that the order had come down? You wrote that to me.

PVG Yes, it was the same girlfriend, and when I had a daughter, I named her after Galya Dokutovich, I named her Galya.

So Galya's spine was injured, and she couldn't, she was in a lot of pain, and we were retreating and got an assignment to bomb the advancing Germans. Sometimes when you landed to get more bombs and fuel, you were told to fly to another location, because the Germans were so close, and the tanks were already close.

So I landed, and Galya is lying down and I had been ordered to take off for a mission. And that was when I think I did the only heroic deed. I gave her my Nagan and I went on my mission without a weapon because I understood that if they didn't have time to take her away she might be captured by the Germans.

RJP Didn't she have her own weapon?

PVG You know, it was an early period of the war, when the handgun was issued only to those who were flying. and she was going to be left behind, you understand? And back then I was very afraid that I would get shot down but not die and would be captured by the Germans.

When I returned from my flight a medical plane arrived. First, I was very happy that she was taken away to the doctors, and second, I was happy that I didn't have to fly over the front line without a weapon.

I consider this to be the most dramatic moment. Another thing that happened once was that a bomb almost blew up in my hands while I was above the target. this is more ironic than anything. We were flying at night and in order to make sure that we are above the target, before we bombed we dropped some flares, something like a candle, in order to see what was beneath us.

It was in winter and we had these gloves made of fur and leather, It was so cold that when you were shooting the machine-gun the skin would stick to it. But I couldn't work in gloves, so they were hanging on a leather cord across my neck. And you know, this flare, in our miracle plane we just threw them over the side by hand.

We had to untwist the fuse. Then it would light in ten seconds. So I untwisted the fuse but I can't throw it! It got tangled in the cord that was holding my gloves. And the seconds go by, one...two...three... And this is happening above the target, we are being shot at.

RJP How did you light the fuse?

PVG You didn't need to light it. It was like a spinner. You just removed it and it would go off, there is a mechanism inside -- 10 seconds and it goes off, so the seconds are running and at the end I managed to throw it over the side -- along with my new gloves!

It was scary, but not as scary as being captured alive by the enemy. The fascists, not so much Germans.

RJP Yes, of course. There is a big issue in America right now: the people who are opposed to women being in combat, their main argument against women being at war is that they might be taken prisoners and then they'd be raped. We say, women get raped every day on city streets--

PVG --that is what I say as well--

RJP --and they are not so worried about protecting those women.

PVG What I say is that we are becoming a little more like America. Women were not getting raped until now, and now they are, and in this way we catching up to America.

RJP Were women afraid of that before? Was that a special fear for women -- to get captured and possibly raped?

PVG We only knew that they tortured people, we didn't think about a sexual way in particular, just torture in general. We didn't want to fall prisoner.

RJP That's the point: being a prisoner is terrible for anyone, man or woman.

PVG You know, in general our morale was actually very high.

RJP I have one other question . . . are you getting tired?

PVG Please, I will answer all your questions.

RJP People wonder how you found their targets, you had so little equipment in that aircraft, and it was at night. How did you manage?

PVG Well, first of all it was just skill, training. How did we find targets? The pilots know that there are landmarks that you can't miss: roads, woods, towns. And we would studied the area constantly. When, for example, we would get to a new spot, we would get out a map and study the area within our flight radius. There were people who flew before us there, and we would get the instructions and regulations. If you didn't do that work, you didn't fly.

RJP It must have been difficult, because the friendly forces were so close to the enemy.

PVG Yes, of course, it was difficult. For example Aronova and I, it was during our last flight, it was unbelievable. It was on either German or Polish territory, it was northwest of Berlin. And there goes one of our units, and then a German unit, everything is mixed up like in a pie. And suddenly the fog began covering everything. It was some German town, I can't remember the name of it.

When we took off, suddenly the engine stopped working. What to do? The land was covered in fog and we didn't know where were our units and where were the German ones. But according to regulation, we had to drop the bombs before landing. The rules were to find a lake or a river but the fog was everywhere.

Not far away from the airfield from which we flew, there was a church with a long steeple on top, and it stuck up through the ground fog, so we knew were close. We flew by and we saw red fog, we had a red light for a notification at our aerodrome. So we landed. We kept rolling and rolling, even though we turned the engine off. The bombs were still on the plane. The airfield was in an opening in the woods, and if got to the trees and hit a tree, we would blow up. Of course we had landed far away from the start and from the light.

The plane suddenly stopped. There were trees few steps away from us. We jumped out of the plane, we were young, and we started dancing and jumping around! And there was an old soldier, for such services older people were used. He was somewhere from the east, Kirgizia maybe, and he said "Shaitan! why are you jumping!" [laughter]

RJP Who decided which targets you would hit?

PVG It was war, there was a chain of command. In aviation we served the needs of the ground forces.

I would like to ask you that some things would be changed [in your article]. For example you wrote that "Gel'man remembers that she had to fly" several times in your article. But it is not only me, we all had to fly, not only us, other crews as well. Some people like to brag. I would not want to look like that.

*Discussion followed about the paperwork giving her permission for me to use the interview in my work, and to donate copies of the tape to archives.*

RJP I am very grateful to you for taking so much time with your letters and for seeing me now.

PVG You are very welcome. I am always glad to serve a good cause.