



IVAN BILASHCHENKO

(Dmytrivka village, Ukraine, May 9, 1926)



© Kuba Krizo / Dikh He Na Bister

“I had to live three lives. The Holodomor [The Great Famine]. The Genocide. And the war front. If you ask me which was worst – without hesitation I would answer – genocide. Because we always lived in the expectation that if not today – tomorrow we will be shot.” These are the words of Ivan Korniyovych Bilashchenko, a Roma, colonel and veteran of World War II who survived the Holocaust.

Ivan Bilashchenko was born on May 9, 1926, in a family of settled Roma in the village of Dmytrivka, Zolotonosha district, Cherkasy region. His father, Korniy, was a veterinarian, and his mother, Hanna, was a seamstress and worked on a collective farm. His father lived through the First World War, leading to the deterioration of his health, and he eventually contracted bone tuberculosis. This made it impossible for him to survive the hunger of 1932-1933. He died in 1933, leaving his wife with four young children.

Before the war, Bilashchenko graduated from grade eight of high school. When his older

brother and uncles were drafted into the army at the beginning of the war, 15-year-old Bilashchenko **wanted to join the partisan movement** to defend his homeland. However, his mother forbade it since he was the eldest man in the family and had to help feed the younger children.

At the age of 16, Germans sent Bilashchenko by train to a German forced labour camp. But between Kyiv and Zhytomyr Bilashchenko **jumped off the train**. It took him a week to walk home, but on his third day back, he was **arrested by the Gestapo**. Bilashchenko was severely beaten and sent to work on the railway station – to repair railway connections. The foreman of their working team was a Pole, who had access to administrative and logistical information. With his help and the assistance of the head of the village, Bilashchenko and his accomplices **managed to prevent the deportation of 40 young people for forced labour**. On the day the train was sent, they hid in the surrounding forests to avoid capture. Among those saved was one of Bilashchenko's cousins, Manya.

At around the same time, the village administration received a request for the names of Jews and

Roma living in the village. Executions were to be conducted on the basis of the lists. Bilashchenko recalls: "If we lived in a tense relationship with people, we would be shot on the first day. **Our family was highly respected in the village.** My aunts and uncles were married to Ukrainians". The family was rescued by the head of the village, a friend and classmate of Bilashchenko's uncle, who reported that there were no Roma in the village. In order to appease and assure the Gestapo leadership that the Bilashchenko family were not Roma, the head of the village collected the family's gold and handed it over to the Gestapo. However, it did not help for long. The village head was executed for lying and supporting the partisans. After that, Roma families feared they would be executed any day. Death was only avoided by the rapid approach of the Red Army and the retreat of German forces.

Bilashchenko's brother-in-law, his sister's husband, was less fortunate. For some time, they hid in the village of Dmytrivka, together with the Bilashchenko family, since raids on Roma were more frequent in the area in which they lived. In the spring of 1942, on the way home, they were shot. Only Bilashchenko's sister survived – their mother had not allowed her to accompany her husband.

After the Red Army's arrival, Bilashchenko was commissioned in the field **military enlistment office at the age of 17.** "The military doctor patted me on the shoulder and asked, 'Are you going to beat the Germans?' And what shall I say? "I will!" – Bilashchenko recalled. So, in 1943, he was mobilised into the Red Army. Bilashchenko's first two weeks were spent on the front, without any preparations. After that, together with other young Roma peers, he was sent to military school for accelerated training and was appointed to oversee military communications. Bilashchenko's military career saw him posted in Vitebsk, Belarus, Lyubava and Poland. During his career, he received two injuries and a contusion. The first was a shrapnel wound during the battle near Vitebsk, where Bilashchenko and the other recruits were first sent after military training. After two months of treatment, he was sent back to the front again. His second injury saw him shot his leg, and in 1944, at the end of the war, he received a contusion, which damaged his carotid artery. After that, Bilashchenko suffered significant health problems. **He ended the war with the rank of colonel.** After demobilisation, Bilashchenko graduated from the technical construction school in Poltava. Now he has a 55-year-old son, Grygory, a 70-year-old daughter, Valentyna, six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

To this day, Bilashchenko takes an active role in public life. He is the **hero of several historical exhibitions**, fondly **attends meetings** with young people and **gives interviews**. In his speeches, he always encourages young people to study and remember the pages of the past. Bilashchenko usually ends his speeches on the following note: "Anyone who has not experienced suffering and fear, or at least not listened to those who have experienced it, is unlikely to truly appreciate life."

Sources and further information:

1. The biography is based on interviews recorded by the Roma Youth Organization "Youth Agency for the Advocacy of Roma Culture "ARCA" in 2019-2020.
2. http://www.holocaust.kiev.ua/Files/naykVid/roma_book1.pdf
3. <http://www.genocideagainstroma.org/>
4. https://gazeta.ua/articles/people-and-things-journal/_nazustrich-ishov-starij-prostyagnuv-dva-vareniki-a-zaplakav/958670
5. <http://romagenocide.com.ua/ivan-korniiovych-bilashchenko/>
6. <http://romagenocide.com.ua/data/files/EXHIBITION/13%20Ivan%20Bilaschtschenko%20sm.pdf>

This biography has been written by Tetiana Storozhko