

*Back in the USSR: Memoir*

Maurice Mierau

A Black Maria skulked like a short hearse, parked in front of my grandfather's house in Nikolaifeld, a village in Ukraine. It was late December 1937, middle of the night. My dad was two months old and asleep.

Four men exited the Black Maria and knocked loudly on the door. They had come for my dad's father, Cornelius Mierau. Two of the men were teenagers carrying rifles with fixed bayonets. The others were men from the village who helped the communists round up troublemakers in exchange for immunity from persecution.

My dad's sister Lil remembers details of that night: the white lace tablecloth in the kitchen, the dirty boots of the men who came for her dad, and how rusty the bayonets on the rifles looked in the candlelight. She remembers her father hoisting her up on his shoulders for a ride while the men with the rifles waited, looking down at their dirty boots. She was five years old and her father was thirty-six. This is her last memory of him.

For a few minutes my father stayed asleep in the crib while his mother made more and more noise, talking, pleading, yelling, crying. Then my dad cried and yelled too. The Black Maria drove away to the village jail with Cornelius.

This is how I imagine my grandfather Cornelius's last days, even though no witnesses are left:

Cornelius loved music. He built stringed instruments, and he could play violin, seven-string guitar, mandolin, flute, piano, anything he got his hands on. In jail and

without any instruments except his voice, he hummed quietly to himself. The guard told him to shut up. He remembered then what he was avoiding: Lil's soft dark hair when he touched her head the last time; his son's smooth arms and milky burps. Helen's beautiful forehead, the proud way she held it up even though they were poor. Would he ever lie in bed with her again, smell her nightclothes? He tried to clear his mind and sleep by repeating a prayer, over and over again.

Early the next morning the men drove Cornelius thirty kilometres to the city of Zaporozhya. There, the GPU, Stalin's secret police, used the local prison's basement for interrogations and temporary imprisonment. The basement was useful because it had many small rooms to do things in, and the sounds prisoners made traveled easily to the other rooms and even outside, where wives and families could hear and were meant to hear.

Cornelius was accused of treason under Section 58 of the penal code. Someone from the village put his name on the list of traitors in exchange for immunity. The charges were that in addition to violating the law by refusing to sing a Communist song with his youth group, he also poisoned horses at the collective farm where he worked. In truth Cornelius had been willing to sing the music of the Communist song, but not the words, and he never poisoned horses, although he didn't like them much.

The party bosses here knew that the truth and the names didn't really matter, only the total number. There was a quota of German nationals from this area who had to die. It would be good for the bosses if they met or exceeded that quota.

One of the GPU guards threw Cornelius into a room with the windows boarded up. Cornelius hit a chair as his body spun around; the guard held his collar just long enough to make him move like a top — Cornelius was light, small to begin with and

undernourished. A few of his ribs cracked when he hit the chair and he slumped into the corner clutching his chest. He imagined playing a high note on the violin as a harmonic, lightly touching the string, the vibration almost beyond the physical realm, the pain that staggered him.

“Toilet?” said the guard next morning, waking him up from where he lay crumpled on the floor.

“Yes, toilet,” he said, and he was taken to a little shed behind the building. The door had been removed so prisoners would not escape while pretending to do their business. Of course there was no water or toilet paper. He got shit on his shoes but there was no time to wipe it off.

The guard hustled Cornelius back into his cell. He saw no one except when he was given a meal or taken to the toilet. In the meantime he could hear what happened to other prisoners. From other basement rooms came shouting, slaps, thuds, and almost every day, gunshots from the yard above. He sat motionless and tried to remember musical scores, hymns, the bass lines on a seven-string guitar. If the guard was out of sight he moved his hands as if playing an instrument, or touching his children’s hair. He would spend more than a month like this, waiting.

One early morning Cornelius was taken from his cell to the interrogation team, always a troika who voted on the prisoner’s fate. The outcome rarely changed. Three men stood in the room around a table with a single piece of paper on it.

“This is your confession. Read and sign.” The troika leader was a ruddy, tall man with highly polished black boots who held his back stiffly erect. He sniffed the air as if the smell of it bothered him. His second placed a pistol on the table in front of them. A large bloodstain was at head level behind Cornelius, who stood. The troika leader

reminded Cornelius of a deacon in their church, an officious man who dressed carefully and made deals with the bosses.

“It says here I am an enemy of the state and that I poisoned horses. These are lies. How can I sign?” asked Cornelius, instantly realizing that he had made an error. One of the troika moved suddenly and pistol-whipped him as a reminder that his questions were impertinent and wasting everyone’s time. Cornelius saw blood drip from his head onto the table. The pain was outside him now, his vision fuzzy. He imagined the communion wine in church, how it stained your fingers when it spilled over the cup’s edge.

“We need to deal with your offense under Section 58. No one can predict the outcome but justice must be done,” said the leader.

“I won’t sign,” said Cornelius. There would be no justice here, he knew. They didn’t care if he signed the paper. “What will you do with me?” No one answered him. He thought of Jesus on the cross, beaten and calling to his father, but that was sacrilege. He was not Jesus. But he had calculated the odds of his own survival now, and saw that they were not good.

The troika made many decisions that day, including for him, right then. Prisoners who did not sign confessions were to be shot immediately because there was no way to transport all of them to Siberia within the next month. The Stolypin train cars held only thirty-five people even if prisoners were stacked like salamanders on top of each other. Besides, there was little to feed them once they arrived at Construction Project 501, the tundra-spanning railroad in northern Siberia.

These were all convenient facts, since this district had so many of the German national minority, whose numbers had to be reduced by quota anyway. Therefore the

least cooperative must be shot now, most of the others later. Unreformable political prisoners like Cornelius were perfect for filling the quota.

Two guards grabbed him by the shoulders of his coat. The coat tore with a loud noise. They pushed him against the wall near the bloodstain. He pulled his mind away and smelled fresh dill cut into soup, saw a white potato slice, a red beet floating in broth, the callous on his wife's thumb where she gripped the knife. One of the guards held a gun to his head. The other held up the paper with the charges.

"I won't sign," Cornelius said emphatically. He felt his bowels give way and smelled the shit just as he heard the explosion like a string snapping on one of his own violins, the f-hole near his head, and brains and bone fragments spattered on the wall, enlarging the stain.

"Get a goddamn bucket," said one of the guards. "Regier will kill us if this place stinks any worse. Next time shoot at the neck and do it outside."

My grandmother Helen went a few times to where Cornelius was imprisoned in Zaporozhya. She had food for him, *zwieback*, dried prunes. She hoped they had not sent him away already. She hoped that he was still alive. There were gunshots quite often in the morning, but she heard that only the criminals got killed. Her husband was not a criminal. When she reached the front of the line, they took her food and promised to give it to Cornelius Mierau. She walked home quickly, and returned with food once a week for four weeks. Prisoners' wives could only come on Sundays.

In early February, their neighbour Mr. Neufeld stood at the front of the line with Helen. He touched her elbow. She remembered him as a boy, always eager to get ahead.

"Don't bring food anymore, Frau Mierau."

“Why not?” she was frightened by possibilities she had tried not to consider.

“If you do you will be arrested too and your children sent to an orphanage.”

She stared at him for a few seconds. She turned and walked quickly to the highway, where she met Gerhard Bergen. Gerhard was Cornelius’s best friend. He’d been arrested with him and also accused of being an enemy of the state. They said Gerhard strangled piglets on the collective farm and sang religious songs. He’d seen Cornelius taken into a small room and heard the gunshot. Gerhard signed his own confession immediately and expected to get at least ten years in a labour camp, assuming he survived. Instead they released him right away. There were shortages of bullets now too, so he was lucky.

“Helen, don’t wait for Cornelius,” he said.

“But what will happen to him?”

“He may survive up north.”

“Do you know if he signed a confession?”

“He never did.”

She ran her hand down the side of her dress to avoid sighing.

**Maurice Mierau's** last book, *Fear Not*, won the ReLit award for poetry in 2009. This excerpt is part of an unpublished memoir that concerns adopting Maurice's two youngest sons in Ukraine in 2005, and his father's traumatic childhood fleeing Soviet Ukraine with the German army in 1943. Latest info at <[www.mauricemierau.com](http://www.mauricemierau.com)>.