

## **At Baba Vera's**

Some of the most memorable moments of this holiday took place at Baba Vera's home in the village Martinivka. Baba Vera had lived there until she had followed her husband Vasil to Murmansk in Russia where he was stationed as a member of the Red Army. The couple moved back to the village when her parents became old. They then extended the two-room house by two more rooms and eventually built in a gas stove. Since Vasil died, Baba Vera has been taking care of the place and its various animals by herself. She considers this the usual chores of a woman and wife, as they had been traditionally.

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Visiting Baba Vera's house for the first time, I felt as though I was entering a living museum. I was surprised to find a quite tall lady, for Ukrainian standards. I approached and greeted her and then went back out to help unload the car.

Baba Vera, too, was impressed by my appearance. Going home that day, Galina reiterated her words to me: „She is a real German. It was people like her who were here.“ I felt awkward. What had I done? At our next visit, I asked Baba Vera about it and without hesitation she said: „It is because you look German! It's your face, your height, your hair! I was young when the Germans were here, and I was very scared. The more you are scared as a child the better you remember as an adult. I remember these shapes very well. They were all tall, had long faces and either blonde or ginger hair.“ [...] Only later, it occurred to me that Germans were probably the only West Europeans that Baba Vera had met.

[...]

## **Baba Vera's stories**

When resting, having tea, peeling potatoes or cutting corn, or in the evening, Baba Vera recalls events of her life. Most of them took place in her youth which was after the Second World War and which must have been a horrible time. Baba Vera was widowed twice in her early 20s. One thing she said stayed in my mind: “It was bad when you died in the war or never returned from Germany. It was degrading when you died because there was no room for you in the hospital.“

German soldiers had abducted young people from Ukraine as war prisoners. These people returned after 1945. One of Baba Vera's aunts was known to be grumpy following her return. She said that this was due to the village's poverty. "You can't possibly live here after you have seen the good life". This so-called good life were the needy post-war years on a German farm. The aunt had taken care of her sick mistress and thus spent time inside the house a lot rather than on the fields. When the aunt finally returned, Baba Vera recalls, the whole village coming together to look at her aunt's „fancy cloths and her white white skin“.

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### **During and after the war**

Baba Vera had quite a few things to say about the German invasion. Two stories stand out because she tells them a lot. They were incidents of support from German soldiers that her mother had been talking about, already.

Once, Vera was sorting watches and purses of fallen soldiers together with other children while the adults were dealing with cloths and shoes. Trying to pick up something she had lost, she bent down, fell on her face and wounded her nose. A German doctor found her, took out medicine from his purse and showed her mom how to apply it.

Another time, Vera's mother was busy with her little sister and Vera escaped. The family lived in an underground wooden shelter close to the present house. The house served as a German food storage. Vera slipped in and took a few conserves and a sausage off the shelves. Initially, her mother dared not to go after her afraid of getting both of them shot. She eventually said a prayer and went in to put the food back onto the shelves. The soldier guarding the house came in, took the food back down, gave it back to Vera and added a few more cans. Then, he stroke her hair, clapped her butt and signaled to her mother that he was the father of three and didn't want to be here. Her mother stayed silent, still scared of being shot from behind.

Baba Vera always concluded: "You cannot say that they were all bad". And sometimes, she added: "Had these Germans been nice to the people, they could have proceeded to Japan. Who liked the Soviets?"