

I'm Sidney Elsner. Today, December 18, 1984, we are interviewing Abraham Lerer, a Holocaust survivor, and a partisan fighter, this project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section.

Abe, first I want you to tell us about the book you're holding in your hand which relates about Jewish partisans behind the German lines in Poland and Russia in World War II, a group in which you fought in. Tell us first about the book, what it describes.

Well this book reflects the life in the partisans being how we operate in order to attack the Nazis behind. And we never could confront with them I mean in a battle. But our aim was only to attack them in the nights. In the nights also, we chose the worst nights, when it was rainy, raining, or snow, or cold. This was or us the opportunity in order to attack him.

OK, Abe.

Now step by step, we'll recite later on how you came to join the partisans. But I want you to begin at the beginning. What your town was, where you were born, what your family was like, what happened to your relatives, what it was like when the Germans came. And then we'll come back to the partisans.

I was born in 1914 in the city of Brest-- they call it Brest-Litovsk. Now, during in that time, it was Poland I mean before the war. But when the Germans occupied, and we had to leave the big town because the life was very brutal and danger.

Now, we tried to get away from the big town, to another little town.

When you say we, who do you--

I mean the family. My family.

Name them. How many members in the family?

In the family it was I was, my father, and mother, my first wife, a little child, and my sister I had to leave in the city she was. And then over there was we had the territory which is surrounded with woods. And there was a bigger opportunity to organize a partisan, people which escaped from the destruction.

Well, first were you in a ghetto of any kind?

It was a ghetto.

And where was this? What city?

The ghetto was in the city, we call it a little town, Manievich. There was a ghetto. And in the ghetto was the life was terrible, because they took from us away everything, contribution. They took away from us everything in order to equip the German army, even with clothes and so forth.

What year did this start?

This start in 1941.

OK, now in 1939, the Germans came into Brest-Litovsk?

The Germans came in. It was not in '39. It was they came in and then they left, because at that time they made the split with the Russians the territory. But then when the German attack the Russian army--

The Russians occupied your area first.

First, right.

In the partition of Poland.

Right.

And then when they attack, and immediately overnight--

In June of '41.

Yeah, overnight it was already occupied by the Germans.

OK. Let me take the book from you that you're holding. And that will take it out of your hands. Now go ahead and tell us. You were married and how old were you?

Well I was about 27 years old, 27 years old when I was married. And I mean--

All right you had a wife, and any children?

I was just a beginning marriage. It was like my family. And I had just one child. The child was born in 1942. I really didn't want the child should come. I mean but it was too late, because I knew I'll have to give another victim.

And we were also on that in the conditions, the conditions were terrible conditions. It was a dream to get a piece of bread so far.

Abe, we want to go back a little bit earlier and find out what kind of work you were doing in peace time.

In peace time, I am a cabinet maker, which I learned the trade before the war. And this was my occupation.

Now the village you were living in, had many Jews, a few Jews?

It was not a village. It was a town.

Yeah, how big?

It was a town about 300 families, Jewish families. Jewish families. And in the way, they prepared the destruction was not in every city, was not happening the same way. For instance, in one town, they made other conditions. In the other town, they tried to change. Because they tried that the people, they should be like to mix up the people. This is the way they prepare this.

Not every place, because in one town it was happened already, and the other town they left. In the third town it was happening. In the forth town, they left. They tried to mix up the people. We never could expect exactly when the moment will come. And when everything was already prepared and the whole city was surrounded, I was together with my family, with my wife, with my mother, with my little child. And unfortunately, I was the only one from my family which I, with God's help and somehow, they took me already too. I was in the group.

But I somehow escaped.

Excuse me. They were taking you where, to be killed?

To be killed, right.

OK.

I was to the last moment, to the last moment--

A group of men, you were being marched away.

Not only men. All the groups they took out from the houses and they prepared them already in the evening, for the night, they should be--

You had to prepare your own graves?

No. The grave was already made. It was made by Polish people, by an other nationality. It was prepared the graves. And when it was everything surrounded, and it was no way out to get out, that's when this was done.

We'll come back to your escape in a minute. But tell us about these death squads. Were these the Einsatzgruppen?

See, really it was in our place was not the Einsatzgruppen. This was just like the administration. They all--

Was it the army?

Huh?

Was it the army, the German army?

It was the German army but there was not-- they didn't want to, I mean, this was not a regular army. These were just like before he goes to the battlefield, and after in the back, because the administration.

The clean-up. The Einsatzgruppen.

Yeah.

OK.

And then everything, when they took over our little town, our city, they were already organized. For instance, they didn't touch, in the beginning. They prepared everything. They organized everything. We had a city hall, with a Jewish mayor, a Jewish police. In the beginning, we carried on the left hand, a white armband with a blue Magen David. This was in the beginning.

Later, they changed. They changed to yellow patches, and the big from the patch was 10 centimeter, the diameter. And we carried one on the left side and one in the back on the shoulder. Because if you're going and you march someplace, you go someplace, they could see you from the front, and they also can spot you on the back. This is the way they organized this.

And this was the Einsatz, not from the SS. And the life was every day was worse and worse and worse. Then they took away from us everything. For instance, they had to get for the German army clothes. Everything, because the weather over there, the farther, it gets a little bit colder. So we had to give away everything what we had.

And then there wasn't enough food for us. We couldn't get food. We couldn't buy. We couldn't. The only food what we can get for some, for clothes, for valuable things, because money was in at that time was not available at all. And this I already in there prepared in a way, and then they grouped together the people. They took from one town, and they put in another town, and they grouped together. And they dug holes.

And they surrounded very tight, because a lot tried to get out, and was immediately killed. And I gave up, what I said, whatever's got to be, it's got to be. And then in the last moment, I changed my mind because I had to say it was very tragic to say to my wife, and to my mother, my father, to say goodbye forever. But in this kind emotion of life, a person

gets emotional. Sometimes he says yes, and sometimes no.

And my mother says, listen. We are already lost what we can do. But try for yourself. And I listened to her, and somehow I escaped. And they were shooting after me. But unfortunately, I was not the only one.

Wait. Back up a minute.

You escaped when you were in this group that was being sent out to the grave-sites?

I was--

Everybody was supposed to be shot.

Right?

How many in the group roughly? 100, 200?

See, it was like this. It was I would say about 100 people.

OK. Now the name of the location where this was taking place again?

The name of the location, after there was a town Kovel. And this was taken in the smaller town, Manievich.

In Poland?

This was Poland. But this is already the German, the Ukraine, the Ukraine Poland.

OK.

Ukraine, Poland. Because you got Ukraine part of Russia.

Yes. But this was Ukraine Poland.

OK, now tell us how you were able to escape and were the rest of the family killed at the time you escaped?

I escaped from the group.

How?

Because you see the location was like this. There was no roads like here. Over there it's like sand, I mean the roads was-

Mud.

Mud, sand. And there was a lot of trees and bushes, bushes. So I tried to go closer, to stay closer, closer, closer.

This was near dawn?

And this was already in that time, it start to get a little bit darker.

Near dusk.

And the night was coming closer.

Twilight.

Yes. And I just, in being in the army, I know how you have to survive when somebody's shooting you. I mean you, got to fall down, and you cannot go up. You got to on the hands, you have to. And it was I don't remember. I was not the only. But it was at that time, was a lot which they killed.

OK. What month and year was this?

This was in 1942, September.

You said you were in the army. This was the Polish army?

Yeah, I was in the Polish army before the war.

All right. for two years, was it?

Two years I was.

So you had military training and military experience?

Yeah, I had military training, and I knew how to operate with a rifle, and I knew how if you fell down, your body should lay closer. So this is what I learned experience.

All right. Now Abe, you're out in the woods the first night. Tell us what happened. How did you escape? What did you do?

You see, the first night, now being in that time, I knew a little village, because during at that time when the ghetto, I work with my father was a farmer. It was a little village. It was eight miles from the town.

So I was wandering all night. And then when I really reached to the place, I raised up myself. I was already between the woods. They were shooting me and somehow they didn't-- everything they didn't shot me.

Was anybody else with you?

It was with me, no. With me in that time, I was the only one. In wandering two days, I met a fellow which is mentioned in this book, Zolanka. His name is really Puchtik, but he called his name Porter. He changed his name. And we were wandering together because he was raised in the location over there. And he knew the location better for me. And being with him together, we had to arrange our life.

In daytime we were-- in nighttime we went to get food. In the daytime, we were hiding ourselves, even in the woods.

This very soon after you escaped you met him?

On the third day, on the second day. Because when I escaped, so I went to the farm over there to the farmer. And I told him. And he says, I saw over there the fellow which his name was mentioned. I saw him also. He was a trusted person, which I had confidence. So I left a little-- I wrote it down on a piece of paper. Tell him, if you see the name whatever mentions, I'll be there and there.

And he came in the night 12 o'clock. It was on the third day. And we teamed together. We tried to-- he knew the location better for me, because he was raised and born. See, I came from another city. It was strange for me. But he was raised and born. And he knew the location. And then we were wandering until it start to get like Yom Kippur, before it was cold weather. We had to sleep in the outside.

And in the meantime, we heard already it was an organized group which the leader.

An organized group of partisans.

Partisans. But then I went--

Well, wait just a second, Abe. I want to go back to your friend, Zolanka, because I'm going to reach into this book that we showed you before, Jewish Partisans-- The Documentary of Jewish Resistance in the Soviet Union during World War II, which is compiled by Jack Nusan Porter, who is the son of Zolanka.

Right, right.

Now, I want for the benefit of people who are going to be looking at you 50 years from now, 100 years from now, Abe. It's very important that we set some record of this. It's been said much too often that all Jews went like sheep to their death at the hands of the Germans and the Nazis. You're living proof, of course, that this isn't so. But because this is already written down, I want to read from here what Jack Porter, the editor of this book whose father was Irving Porter, and his original name was Yisroel Puchtik.

Yisroel Puchtik.

And he himself had the code name of Zolanka, the partisan group leader. The fella you met on the third day.

Right.

OK, now, this is what Jack Porter says about the situation. "There are many myths, falsehoods, and half truths associated with the Holocaust. One of the most arrogant of these lies is that all Jews were cowards and that they all walked passively to their deaths. The myths continue. But what is the truth?" Bruno Bettelheim, the psychiatrist, says the resistors were very few in number.

Hannah Arendt, another historian, calls this resistance pitifully small and essentially harmless. Yet Jack Porter says, "it was these very few who in the Warsaw ghetto held off German General Jürgen Stroop and his command of 1,000 SS tank grenadiers, 1,000 men of the SS cavalry, plus two units of artillery for over two months in the spring of 1943, with only a few guns, hand grenades, Molotov cocktails, and plenty of Jewish guts.

It was this essentially harmless nature of the Jewish resistance that forced even Goebbels to admit that now we know what Jews can do if they have arms. It was this pitifully small number of 25,000 Jewish partisans who fought in the forests and mountains of Poland, Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, Belgium, and Italy. Some of them formed autonomous Jewish National units, Jewish partisans led by Jewish Commanders.

However, most of the partisan bands were mixed groups wherein Jews fought alongside Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Frenchmen, Italians, and others. Of the 25,000 partisans, there were a large number of survivors. My father was one of them. Irving Porter, Yisroel Puchtik, called Zolanka in the underground, was a leader of the famous Kruk division, K-R-U-K division led by the Ukrainian leader Nikolai Konoschuk, called Kruk.

They fought from mid 1942 to early 1945 in the vicinity of Manievich, Volhynia."

Maniewiczze, Volyn.

Oh, "in the Ukraine and the USSR." And then he mentions you by name among those who were in the group. It says Avram Lerer of Cleveland, and others. So I want you now to tell us how. We know how you joined up, Avram. We know how you joined Zolanka. Now tell us how you and Zolanka got together and formed a partisan unit.

No. We didn't form the unit. The unit was formed by the Ukraine, what they call him Kruk. During when the Russian, he was like a-- let's say a Communist, you know? But when the Russian left, and he was in a danger position, so he knew the location from the woods over there. Because he was raised and born over there. So he went and he knew in

that time, it was in the same time it was the mass destruction.

So he had an opportunity. And he said, listen, he went to another Jewish family. And he said, why you should wait until the last moment? He said, well, with older people it was up. And he said, let's go in the partisans. I'll organize you. And we can get revenge being in the partisans, I mean the underground.

And he organized. He was the first organized. When we reached to his group, he was the only one which operated in this particular territory where it was already about 20 or 25 over there people.

Was he a commissar?

He was not a commissar. But he was like if you call it, he was a young fella. They call it Komsomolets. It means like a scout. A scout, being for the Germans, he also was like in the head from the city, the little city over there, the little village, he was the head man. So naturally, when the Germans took over, he had to escape because, again, not the Germans, the people which were against them. Because over there they got, the Ukrainians, they have what they call it Banderovtsi. A Ukrainian leader, they call this Bandera, which he was a nationalist, and he tried to cooperate.

Not he, I mean he was dead already. but they have this is like nationalists. They try to get the Ukrainian territory, they should rule the Ukrainian territory. I mix everything together, because this united together, you see? In that time, he really was which he gave us, he organized this. Because it was he knew the territory and he helped us out. Then we organized to get more weapons, and rifles, and so forth.

Before we come to how he helped you, tell us how you met him.

Oh, how I met him? You see, when I was wandering together with this Srulik, in the nights, so we went to a farm, to a farm place. And we tried just, and it was a very friendly person. And over there, they got like here the farms like what they call it? The Amish.

The Amish.

Amish. They don't believe in fighting. They don't believe. This is a kind of a group of people. And they tried to help out. There's not a lot over there. But the farmer was like an Amish fella. And he says--

I'm interested. When you say like an Amish fella. Do you mean it was the same sect?

It's the not the same sect, not the same, but it's similar.

The principles were the same.

The principle, the same as here. This is the way they are. And he gave us-- he said, you come to me and I'll give us a little place in the back. And you stay for two or three days. It was dangerous. In that time, he took a big risk. If they would find out at that time, it was already an order if they would find by a arisch person, a Jew, they will destroy the whole family, and they will burn, destroy. But he was a religious fellow. And he believed he didn't.

And he was like a connection. When the other group, the group which was organized, they had a connection with him. He was a trusted person. And we were over there two nights. And in the meantime, I had already a rifle organized for myself, a rifle.

Where did you get a rifle?

I get it also from a farmer, which he gave me the rifle. And he was also a sincere person. He gave us the rifle. And he gave us they call it?

Bullets?

Bullets. And he says, there is the rifle. And go, he says. And I had a rifle. In the meantime, it was, and in this direction was not only one from this town. It was from other towns too, which they tried to escape. And he told us about this group. So on the second--

This was a Christian farmer?

A Christian farmer.

And you're all Jewish.

We were all Jewish. But he was a trusted person to us. Without these trusted people which we had from the-- we could not exist in the woods. I mean they brought us the whole news of what is going on, when the Germans are going to be, and where they are, and all news. This was for us like news.

We've heard many a story about Ukrainian farmers, Polish farmers, and such, who turned Jews in. But very seldom do you hear about those who hid them.

This is what I say. This is very seldom. This is very seldom. But he is the one which we trust him, because that's Srulik, he knew even the farmer, he knew his father. Because he was direct from not far. He knew the whole family. And when he saw him, he said, he started to kiss him. And he couldn't help him or anything. But I said, listen, the only help that I can give you, come to me, and I'll try to help you a little bit.

In the meantime, he didn't told us. In the meantime, the group which was only start to organize, they also already, he was already our connection to the group. And about 10:00, about 8:00, they came over in the night. And this is the way they brought us to the place where it was already organized. That's evolved in--

So, he got you to Kruk.

We went to Kruk. He was the only one. Later start more. But Kruk was the only one, which he organized this particular group.

Now this is an formerly Russian held territory of Poland, Ukrainian Poland.

It's formerly under Polish Ukraine, which now it's really not. It's Russia.

Now it's back in the Soviet Union.

But before it was Polish Ukraine.

And well occupied by the Germans in their pushed toward Moscow.

Well, when they occupied I mean they went away, you know how far they went away. They was already onto Leningrad. They never reached the Moscow.

No.

But they were there close to Moscow. I mean. But near Leningrad, yeah. But at that time, talking about Amish people, everything is based on percentage. Whatever we figure in proportion percentage, 3%, 5%, 10%, or 8%, or 1%, or 1/2%. Now compare really, it was probably I wouldn't say even was 1/2%, and not a quarter of a percent. Talking about the Amish people. Because Polish people I have to admit it too.

For instance, between 10 million, if they find [NON-ENGLISH], how could you figure this out, a percentage?

Yeah. I mean, this--

It's a very rare occurrence.

This is the reality. Everything is based on a certain percentage. For instance people had 10%, it was now the cooperation, it was in favor to the Germans, and this is the way they act.

Abe, you found a group of partisans. Tell us what life was like among the partisans in the first days. You had only the clothes on your back, unless you'd throw away the jacket because of the yellow stars. Had you?

Really when I escaped, I was like, I'm sitting here, just with a little sweater.

And you had one rifle that the farmer--

No, when I escaped, I was almost didn't had any clothes.

Yeah.

Didn't had any clothes. Now the rifle came later. When I had the rifle, I could get something with a rifle. But we didn't have any clothes. But the only thing, we tried to get clothes from the farmers. In the beginning, we tried to go with in understanding in a good way, in good manners. But when this didn't help, we tried in force.

Well, first was you and Zolanka.

Yeah.

The two of you together got some clothes from the farmers.

Well, we still-- we didn't. The clothes what we had was sufficient for us to reach the group. Let's put it this way.

OK.

But then it started wintertime.

All right. But go back to the farmhouse where you got the rifle. The farmers generally had rifles and ammunition?

Every farmer has not one, has two or three. He'll never give away his last one. But he'll share if he is, I mean if he's a friendly person, he'll share with another one. So this is the way. He was not a volunteer to give us the rifle. He was not voluntarily.

You forced him.

But we tried to. He says, he can't. He can't. And we told him, he tried to extend, extend. But finally, we came to him not by really force, but we told him because he was a friendly person. He says, look. You promised but it takes already every night when we show up, you always say extend. Finally, he said he'll come to the next night, I'll have everything.

And then when we came he went under over there, they got the farmers, they have the big where they keep the cattle. It was dark.

Barns?

You keep it. It was a hiding place. It was dark. He took us out a rifle, and it was in wrapped in cloth, in a blanket.

Yeah.

Because this is the way he kept. Otherwise, if they're a rifle, you must keep clean a little bit. Otherwise, they get rusted. And he gave us. Finally, he said, he was not a volunteer to give us.

Now, in this story by Zolanka's son, the father's story says, and you can say whether this is correct or not. It says, after I escaped into the woods I hid for a few weeks with a Gentile friend, meaning the farmer, a Ukrainian who lived in a different town. He gave me a rifle and 150 bullets.

Right.

A rifle was worth gold. You couldn't pay \$1 million for one. And then Zolanka says, I told him I was not responsible for myself. I wanted revenge. My life was worthless. I would burn his house and kill him if he didn't give me a gun. He was scared, and so he gave me the gun. Me means both of you together?

Well, we were all together. I mean we knew positively he has ammunition. We knew. But he never try. You see, over there it's like he'll give away everything, but if it's comes to the rifle, this is the way, the belief. They always try to save for themselves, for the family. He was not a volunteer. But he gave us, by extending, extending, extending, extending. And then we also gave him a very weird-- he had a little bit at that time was available thing. He had a pair of good boots. Leather was rarely available at that time.

So he says, and we gave him the leather. We exchanged for some kind of souvenirs which was very valuable. But this was not the point. The point was he couldn't get for gold, for stones. It was impossible. Because having a rifle, you could survive. And without a rifle, it was a lost proposition. You could wander, it was groups that was wandering, they were surrounded and they destroyed them even in the woods.

Well now, tell us how you made contact with Kruk. In the book, it says, I meaning Zolanka and you of course with him, found a group of about 50 people who had two rifles among them. Within three months, this group grew until it included 200 fighters, about 180 Jews and 20 Russians or Poles, 200 men who guarded the others, and between 500 and 600 women and children.

We had a big job, to find food for nearly 1,000 people and to fight the Nazis.

Well you see now, in that time it was like this. It was for instance, a lot escaped. We are not the only, from other towns. We were wandering. And they organized themselves with normal-- they didn't have nothing. and they just dug a place in the woods, and this is the way. We call it a zemlyanka in Russian. And this is the way they lived.

So we tried to reach. Our aim was in the beginning to get more people. Because we knew. You see, because when they finished, the destruction was finished, even from the graves, I had a friend. We escaped from the grave. Now how can a person escape from the grave? You ask a question. It was in the night. They took him to the holes over there. In the hole, slaughtered them out.

Now by shooting, he tried to-- before this start, he fell down he was laying in the grave. But it didn't-- but it was too late.

Before the barrage.

Yeah. And he was laying. And they didn't cover it up. So in the night, they left this on the second day. In the night, he raised up himself. He says, he got arms, and he got legs. He can do. Finally, he came out in the grave, and they come. And he was from the grave was laying between already the mess, this people. And he came out from the grave. But this was only between 100,000, let's put it, maybe miracles.

Why was the leader of this group a non-Jew if most of the group was Jewish?

Well, we have to get closer. You see, the Jewish people tried to get a revenge, tried to organize. But the Germans, the way the Germans prepared the destruction, they took away from us in the beginning, the intellectual people. What it

means intellectual people? Because in any situation, there's got to be a leader. If it explores something, a leader.

And this is what they did. They took away the intellectual people. They were on the first battlefield, destroyed. And we didn't have-- it was a common class people. And we didn't have intellectual people. I mean not only we. I mean by the average, and to be a leader it's very difficult.

But finally it came out from us, from people which they didn't had any education. I mean they had education. But it's a common class people, like from trades. And we tried to get a leader. But when we reached to the woods, when we reached the woods, for us it was necessary to get a leader, a arisch person. Because for instance, I knew the city. I know the location that was round.

But to go farther away, between the woods over there, we knew somebody which knows the location in the woods, in the forest.

You needed somebody who knew how to hunt and to fight, and to survive in the wilderness.

Not to fight, but within the forest, we need a person, which knows which where to go in the night. Because we operate only in the night. In daytime it was for us no way. And we didn't have too many.

Because the Jewish people were--

Jewish people were--

They were tradesmen.

Tradesmen, and they never--

They were small businessmen.

Small businessmen.

Small shopkeepers in the town.

In that, only the territory was the city. When out of the city, they were lost.

So now you were out in the woods, in the real open. And you depended on that for survival.

In the woods, we needed in the beginning a leader. Because we--

A Gentile who was familiar with this.

Who was familiar with it. I mean this is the purpose.

Right.

Because he knew, he was raised and born in the location. He knew where to go in the night.

And who was your leader?

And the leader, It was Kruk.

What kind of a person was he? How old was he? Did he have military training?

He didn't have military training. But he trained himself. he was very-- he was a little fella, maybe 5 feet tall, skinny

fella. But he knew how to operate with the military. He has like a military school by himself. I don't know. But he really knew.

Now, yourself, you had already had two years in the Polish army.

I had already, I came already, I was a soldier.

You knew about guns.

I knew about guns. I knew how to survive. I knew, for instance, if we reach to a battle, where they try to attack us. I knew where to hide himself. I knew how to fall down, the whole training which I went through. This was a big, big help for me. And I also teach the other groups over there too.

What did you do in the partisans?

Our aim was to get the railroads.

Destroy the rail lines.

The railroad. This was the main purpose. Because we try to stop the hardware, not to get to the battlefield. And we only operate in the night. Also, the communication, we used to chop down at that time now it's a difference, the telephone poles. We used to destroy the telephone poles. In the night, we tried to cut off the whole communication.

So this was a great help for the army. This was how. And then when we didn't reach to this point, we tried to put mines under the railroads. We drag under the railroads, where it's laying here. And we put four or five pounds the ammunition. And we had to stay away. I mean, at that time it was not much control. And we had just, we had a little

Fuse?

Cable, cable. Yeah, and everything was prepared. We had just to pull the cable, pull the cable, then explode it. Sometimes between we were lucky. We reached, we had the explosion before what do you call it? We reached this, when in the end, we were not successful. But when the machine, the power was, what do you call it is what pulls the train?

The engine?

The engine. We tried to get the engine before. You see? Before when the engine passed already, it was we were not successful. Because the engine could go away. So what we tried is to get the engine before. And when we had already destroyed the engine, it was the whole train. And also it took him a long time until they have to clear it away.

We're going to take a little break now, Abe. When we come back, we'll talk more about how you got the shells and the mines in the rural areas where the partisans were operating.