

I'm Sidney Elsner. Today, December 18, 1984, we are interviewing Abe, Abraham Lerer, a Holocaust survivor who's been telling us about his fighting with the partisans behind the German lines. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section.

Abe, when we left off in the last segment, you were telling us that you and your partisan group were trying to destroy German rail lines that were carrying supplies to the Russian front. You were trying to rip down the telegraph and telephone poles. How did you get the ammunition to do this? Where did you get the dynamite from?

Well, the ammunition was when the Russian troops, when they were surrounded, they left a surrounding soldier or a battalion or whatever, they left everything. Now the Germans didn't pick up whatever they left.

Was it buried?

No. It was just laying in certain places where the battle was going on, was laying. They didn't bury this. It was laying. And in the meantime, we had one of which his name was-- he called his name Mohammed. But his real name really was Melamed.

He was a Russian?

He was a Jewish?

But I mean he was a Russian, in the Russian army?

In the Russian army. He was an officer, Captain, artillery. And--

How did he come to join your partisans?

He was a prisoner, a war prisoner. At that time, it was a lot of prisoners which the German kept in the camps, especially that they escaped. They escaped. And they joined in there also it was like an order from the headquarters. If you can escape, go underground.

He was not the only one. There were thousands. But unfortunately, he was the one who reached our group.

Was he originally with a Russian partisan group?

No He was not. He was with the partisans which was organized to the Kruk, Kruk leader.

By Kruk?

Yeah, but he joined--

A different group from yours?

No, he was together with our group.

OK.

And then he had to organize for himself, because he was separate, because he had a certain-- where they worked, he teach them how to take this apart in order. And there was one fellow, 13 years old, I knew him very well. It was an explosion. And he lost his both legs.

This is in dismantling the shells, so you could get the explosives out of them?

Yeah, we had--

This was the Russian captain, Mohammed, Melamed, was teaching your group how to handle the--

Not our group, he had a separate-- not ours. You see I was in the other group. But he was apart from the group, which he didn't allow nobody. He had a certain young, mostly youngsters, 12 years, 13 years, and he taught them. In they like apart from our group. And there was, they organized the explosives.

How big were these shells?

Oh, they were big shells. They were shells probably I would say about three feet long, four feet long. It depends.

Heavy artillery shells?

Heavy artillery. Long artillery. And we couldn't carry.

And you had to take them apart and get the gunpowder out of them?

We had to take them apart. But in order to take apart, it was a dangerous job. But first, we had to take out the explosive. When we took out the explosive, then it was all right. But in the meantime, we paid victims.

And then with this gunpowder, you made your mines.

In the meantime, we cooked this together. And we, for instance, we organized in a way, from one-- you see, it was very valuable for us. We couldn't take, say, take 10 pounds. Because we figured out for this, what you have to go, for instance send a group. For us will give for instance, 5 pounds, not more. Or for other group, we'll give you 8 pounds. We figured out. Everything was figured out, how much in order to destroy a certain section, whatever of the railroad.

We figured out how much explosive we needed for this in order to destroy this.

How did you-- you said you cooked the gunpowder?

You see, I was not in this place. But I do know how. They took apart, and they took out from inside, from the shell. And they cook this. And then it was getting back to one piece, like a frozen piece, a hard piece. And this is the way it was organized. I mean we had round ones too, for instance, for a tree or for a telephone pole. We just dug a hole inside. And we put in a round one. We made round ones. We made square ones, 1 kilogram, 2 kilogram. And this is the way we divided this.

OK, so you had to cook it, get it into a cake, cut it up-- cut it up into pieces.

That's right.

Then make a mine out of it.

Right.

And put an electrical charge in it, or did you use matches to set it off? You wouldn't have electrical batteries.

No. We didn't need matches. We only had to get the explosive. Now the explosive operates like this. It's a little shell. And inside was red, I mean the explosive is inside. The powder is red. Now in the middle, is just a tiny hole. Now, we're pulling this up in the center from the little hole. If you heat in the center, then develops the explosive.

How did you do this?

By pulling, it could be with a spring, with a spring. Or we had cables, which we had to light them also.

How long were those?

Cables, we had 50 or 60 feet, not too long cables.

So you had to light it and run like hell?

We would light it. As soon we light it, we had to disappear. Because this goes so quick, just like you see a little fire over there, and just--

Then it blows up.

And then when it reaches to the this-- we organize in different way. But we didn't--

This was very dangerous work. A lot of your friends were killed, injured.

Yourself? Did you have close escapes? I was fortunately, I escaped. My friend, he lost his arm and his legs. And I have written in Jewish, I have written the name is mentioned here. His name was Zwiebel. And we had to bury him, not from-- he lost his both legs and the arms. Why he lost both legs and the arms?

When he put the mine, it was in the night. Everything we operate in the night. When he put in, now the Germans, they were watching the railroads. They were marching back and forth the nights. They had a certain police which they were in charge of watching the railroads.

Did they have dogs also?

No.

Guard dogs?

No dogs.

OK.

And then each so far, when you put a mine, in each so far, one from the guards, he find out. So he didn't want to go back. He opened fire. So he tried to reach back the mine. By trying to reach back the mine, he by himself, he was tangled up and it exploded. It's mentioned in this book his named too.

I believe it. Now this, you say you operated at the night in the worst possible weather. What did you do in the daytime?

Daytime, mostly we used to rest in what do you call it? Because when we were wandering in the nights, we had to sleep in the-- we were not only. We used to go away for three or four or five, it depends. We couldn't go. We had to go in a way, not main roads. We had to go behind to places which they never expect us. And this took us a lot of time in order to reach.

And this in the nights, the bad nights, the miserable weather, it was for us the best time to destroy.

How did you get food from the Gentile farmers?

Well, in the beginning we tried to cooperate in a normal way. But it was a certain percentage they understood us, but a very small percentage. The majority, they tried-- they didn't want to help us out. So we had no choice. In order to survive, in order to get a shirt, in order to get pants, in order to get something because we the facilities with clothes, they had to help us out. Otherwise, we could not exist. So we went by force.

What means by force? There to pay victims. And by force, then they understood when we are coming, we went to them and we asked for something, I mean we don't play around. I mean you give us, or you pay. And this is the only way in order for us to survive.

So you did that for about 2 and 1/2 years. Now tell me was there any antisemitism in the partisan units?

It was a big antisemitism. From the Russians, the original, I'm not talking about the Ukraine, Polish, we had from the Russian, when they already the groups were bigger and bigger, and separate bigger groups. And when they transferred already through the air and parachutes, they also send us leaders too when they landed. Because it was already controlled by the Army.

Before, we controlled ourselves. But then we had to take orders direct from the main headquarters.

Of the Russian army.

The Russian army.

About what year did this begin?

This begin in the beginning of '43.

So you started to get parachute drops of supplies.

Parachutes.

What did what did they drop to you?

They dropped medicines, medicines, for instance. Because we had like-- we had a little hospital.

Were you in radio contact with them, so they knew where to come?

Oh, yeah. We had, yeah. Not our group.

Yeah, I mean in your group.

We were separate, yeah. In there landed in the night, or they couldn't land, they dropped from a parachute. They dropped a parachute, medicines. The main thing was medicines. Because we had a lot of wounded people. We had to take care of him. And also dropped a short weapon, because long weapons for us, like artillery, this was not--

So they dropped handguns and rifles.

And machine guns. The short machine guns, rifles, and also the-- what do you call it? They ammuni to-- I just forgot.

I want to ask, Abe, about antisemitism within the partisan units. Yours was primarily mostly Jewish in your group. But were there other groups that didn't want Jews, partisans or didn't want Jews?

No. They killed themselves, you see? They hate Jewish partisans. Now, where they, it was--

They is who?

They, I mean the Russians, from the Russian, but was not all of them. But unfortunately, we had a leader which he tried to destroy our whole group. He was the leader.

You don't mean Kruk?

No, no. He tried to take away from us Kruk and to liquidate. And we were in, if we are [INAUDIBLE], we'll stay by ourselves with no leader. Then they'll have opportunity to destroy us. But it didn't work. But he had a plan prepared already.

Do you know this leader?

Sure. I mentioned it.

What's his name? His name was Nasekin.

Was he was a Russian?

He was a Russian Komsomol. And he tried to destroy the whole headquarters. I mean our group.

Unit.

But unfortunately, it didn't work and somebody double crossed him. And we knew the news already. But we had big antisemitism from the Russians, and also from the Ukrainians, with they cooperate together. But this was like the hell.

When the Russians tried to go further and further and to chase back, we were strong. Now, when the German achieved the battle, we figured it was would be impossible for us to get through this. Because we had in our groups was from the other partisan group which they hate us.

Yeah, you spoke primarily of destroying bridges and such, railroad lines. Did you ever come to ambush German troops to fight them singly in small patrols?

Yeah, we came. We came. We paid a lot with my friends over there. And we confronted them, but unexpected. Because it was we had a lot of enemies, and enemies double-crossed us. And we went into a village, and we had to go farther just to rest. They delivered news, everything is all right, you can get further.

See, being in the woods, we could not exist to have connections. We had the outside a little bit connection. Without these connections, we couldn't see. Our aim was not to stay in the woods. We had to go wander and aim to do something.

So anyway, we had from the Ukrainians--

So, you would go into a village and be ambushed?

Double-crossed.

You would be ambushed by the Germans.

Being ambushed, being ambush by the Ukraine police. See, over there, they operate the Ukrainian police with the Germans. For instance, one German, two Germans were 25 or 30 Ukrainian police. They cooperated themselves. And when we were ambushed, he got there by about 5%, 6%, maybe 10%, were ambushed and were killed.

Casualties.

Did it ever come about that you were able to ambush the Germans and the Ukrainians?

Oh, yeah, we ambushed them. We ambushed them we ambushed them. In the beginning, we ambushed and naturally we didn't took him too far away. We just, our aim was just to get from them away the clothes, because we could cooperate

with the clothes. But sometimes we dressed ourselves like Germans. And the rifles, the automats, this was how. But we didn't took him too far.

Because we had no use to take him in someplace. I mean we liquidated him, or hide in the place. We took him away.

No prisoners?

No. No prisoners at all. We didn't let-- we didn't have any use for them. What we needed, sometimes we brought one just to show. So first of all, we took away from him the old clothes. Because a lot of times we went, and we double-crossed the Germans. Because when he saw, for instance, a partisan, but he's not a partisan. It's dressed like a German, with all uniform, with the clothes. And this was what we needed.

And we achieved. But we never took him in prison.

So we now come to the period of late 1944 and early 1945, where the Russian army has retaken this area. Previously Abe, you showed me a typewritten document in Russian that was signed by your group commander. Who was that?

He was like the-- it was not the same Kruk. It was like a higher officer. Already at that time, the territory was liberated.

OK. Who was this?

It was another one. It was not this. His name is Kortyuk.

OK. What I wanted to bring out--

The signature.

This is in late 1944. And already the--

The battlefield was still on.

The battlefield was still on, but already they brought up the typewriters, just like any army. And they wrote out a statement for you that said what?

Well, when the territory from where I come, it was liberated. So I tried to look for my family.

And you needed some identification that this paper--

Without identification you couldn't go no place.

And this was a statement.

This was a statement, for the statement with this signature, with here everything was right. And it allows me to go to look for the family.

But the important thing is to me that he said, what you'd been doing, what you'd been fighting during the war.

In meantime, he wrote down how many trains I tried to destroy, railroads, and so forth, and so forth, during in that time.

He vouched for you.

All characteristics over there.

And the total of this was like 750 actions that you personally--

I mean not only, with groups, with a group.

But you participated.

Right.

750, we can't call them battles, but we call them actions. That's your--

Well, going in that time, you see, because we operated. For instance, we was resting one day.

2 and 1/2 years.

2 and 1/2 years.

2 and 1/2 years in action, 750 times. You're a hell of a man, Abe. A blur. Then what happened after the Germans retreated, Abe?

It was still the war on. Well, you should say, if you ask me, I try the same with the same group or whatever it is. I try to go away to not to go back to the place. I was looking. I went all looking for my family. I didn't find nobody. So I made up my mind.

I said, I want to go to Israel now. And I was not the only one. We organized. At that time was already what they call it the Bricha. You know what Bricha is.

Tell us.

Bricha, it means from the English army, the English army had a brigade.

A Jewish Brigade?

British brigade. What is his name, the general? I forgot the name of the general. Yeah, it was a Jewish Brigade.

Yeah.

And in the Jewish Brigade, it was already from Israel volunteer troops.

Wingate wasn't it?

Huh?

Orde Wingate?

I forgot the name.

Go ahead.

But this was the Bricha. And they already occupied the other side, the American, French, and British. They already took a part up to Austria, Linz, German part. But the war was still on. So the brigade, when we went closer, so we came in connection with the brigade.

Now, the brigade was Jewish soldiers, captains, officers.

In the British Army?

In the British Army? And the brigade tried to help us out. They grabbed us, and they tried to send us to Israel. And I was young at that time. And I had what you call it, a certificate, the British. I said I'll go to Israel with Aliyah Bet, not with the Aliyah. And I settled myself. I went to Austria from Romania, Transylvania, Austria, and then I went to Italy.

In Italy, over there, I was to the--

Before you got to Italy, you were in Lublin?

Lublin, I was going in time in the war, sure. In Lublin, in the city of Lublin, we organized in order to go to Israel. Over there was organized. But everything was not official, was not official. Because the war was still on.

You showed me a photograph that you got in Lublin which I want you to show the people on this program. Hold it up in front of you, so the camera can pick it up, a little higher, and a little back. Good. Now, tell us what this photograph is, and how you got it.

Being in Lublin, we were like a group. And the territory already was liberated. And we went to Transylvania, the same group, a group from 50 people, I would say approximately. And there was young girls and families which survived. So I met over there a girl, her name was Hanka, they call this name in Polish. And she was in Lublin. And she was hiding herself like an Irish.

All during the war?

During the war.

So I used to go out with her. And we talked about a finally. She showed me a little picture. She took away from the SS and when he was visiting in the time I was there, I used to go to girls over there. And she showed me the picture. I asked her, where you got the picture She said this the picture I took away from SS. And this was an original picture which he made this photograph.

Where?

And he came from Auschwitz. And--

So what we're looking at in this photograph close up, is a photograph, an original photograph, taken by a German SS soldier in Auschwitz. And it shows, Abe, the arrival of Jewish transports. Is that correct?

Right.

In the background, the string of German guards, in the foreground hands on their heads and otherwise the people have just piled off their trains on their way to the gas chambers.

Thank you for showing us that picture. You can put it down now.

OK.

Now, tell us after you left Lublin, you didn't go to Israel.

No. I established myself in Italy.

How long were you there?

I was 1945, five years. What do you do in Italy for five years? Were you always in a camp?

In Italy, I just forgot to tell you, with me, being in Italy then came over the Jewish Distribution Committee. I still have my house, if you have time. I got like a photograph. And I worked for the Jewish Distribution Committee in that time was the International Organization, the IRO. And I tried to go to Israel. But in the meantime, I was alone by myself. And I tried to remarry and I find a girl. And she says she wants to go to the States, United States.

And I really didn't have nobody. I had just from my city, because we got the [NON-ENGLISH] here in Cleveland. But close friends, I lost. And I was until 1950, and in 1950, they allowed me to the naturalization immigration to go to the United States.

Where were you working for the Joint Distribution Committee?

In Rome. I still got a picture, and I got still when I was over there, what I did over there.

I worked over there until I left. I still got an accommodation letter too from the director.

Abe, you've been through an experience that very, very, very few people even have knowledge of, let alone have participated in. Today, we've got a lot of militancy in the world, including Jewish militancy in Israel and in the United States. What do you think now about today's generation of Jews. And first, what do you think about the Jewish Defense League?

Well, it's a very difficult answer because it's evolved. I really by myself, I don't believe in force. I believe in friendship. I believe to communicate with people, regardless what faith. But when it comes to the Jewish, the Jewish history, this is really a hard question to answer.

I don't believe, but sometimes the situation is the ends for themselves. Because what we went through, start from the history, years ago, thousands of years ago we went through. Starting from Egypt and in Persia, in destruction. The first destruction, the second destruction, and then came the European destruction.

And the way I look, the world don't accept us, to recognize as a nation. I would say the Arab world, they don't accept us. Now, by not accepting a person with a history which went through, which is no nation in the world, it's very difficult to answer. If somebody don't want me, he don't recognize me. It means he wants to destroy me. It's very plain. And history, this is the best factor I would say.

What can young Jews learn from the Holocaust and from the Jewish resistance?

Well, the young Jews, they should learn I would say in every school starting from elementary, and they should learn the history, and our Jewish life and what we went through. And I think this is a pattern for them. They should learn and they should ask themselves, who I am. Who I am? I am something or I'm just a victim for the world.

Do you have any particular appraisal of the Jewish Defense League?

I have to come to the same solution. I really don't believe in force, in defending I mean the way the Rabbi Kahane, his philosophy. I would say there is not one doubt in thousands and thousands and maybe tens of thousands which they agree with him in his philosophy. But openly they will not come out in support.

And I have to come to the same conclusion. The best lesson for us, what we had, I mean this was I think enough. This was more than enough. And we have to go from there.

Abe, can you please tell me how your Holocaust experiences affect you now in 1984?

Well it affects because it's not a forgettable thing. If there is some kind, if you hear somebody say that's happened and let's forget it. It's already 40 years, and what we can do? We cannot bring it back. Let's forget it. I disagree. I have this in the night's dreams, which I went through. And I think this is not forgettable. You should never forget this.

Of course, that's one reason we're putting all this on videotape for future. What made you decide to share your experiences with us? Why are you sitting in that chair today and talking to us?

Well, I would say this is only a memory for the history. That's all what it is, a memory for the history.

Do you think that survivors have a message that others need to understand?

I think, yes. Because we have, in between us a Jewish people and Gentile, they feel sorry with us. They paid us a little. I mean and they try to show some humanity and goodwill and understanding. Because the time it's passed already the time. The time is the best factor, the time. But it seemed possible, for instance, when sitting together with you, you hear the whole story. I mean you know the reality.

But still, it's a gap between. It's impossible a person which went through the Holocaust, it's impossible everything all the tales to bring this out to the reality. We must learn, and learn, and again learn.

Thank you, Abe. This is Sidney Elsner. Our Holocaust survivor today has been Abraham Lerer. This project has been sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. Thank you.

Thank you.