

Sergei Petrovich [born Chaim Shapiro], interviewed November 18, 1991
Summary by: Joseph Bradley, March 6, 2019

Chaim Shapiro b. 6 January, 1931[?] in Grodno; lived on 9 Magistratskaya Street, then family moved to 10 Pochtovaya Street (in 1991, Sotsialisticheskaya St.)

Father: Shlomo Shapiro, a stonemason, owned workshop on Meshchanskaya St. (in 1991 Podvolnaya St.), near Haymarket, the Bernardine Polish Catholic Church and the synagogue, where he carved tombstones. Father born in Grodno.

Mother: Sarah Shapiro [no maiden name given], a seamstress, from Białystok.

Brother: Abraham, b. 1932

6 uncles (father's brothers), who lived in Grodno, one of whom [not named] lived in the same courtyard on Pochtovaya.

Prewar

In 1939-1941, Shlomo Shapiro made two obelisks to the war dead. Chaim says that his family was well off.

Chaim spent summer 1940 at maternal grandparents in village Ogorodniki, on River Biala, near Białystok. His [paternal?] grandfather Abraham was a cantor and took him to synagogue. He finished two grades of a private Jewish school and knew Yiddish, German, Polish and Russian. In 1941 his parents wanted him to go to music school, but war intervened.

WWII

The German invasion created an opportunity for persecution and revenge. Jews were ordered to move to ghetto (No. 1), near Market Square, entrance on Zamkovaya [Castle] St. Later, ghetto No. 2 was created near Slobodka Market, near cemetery and Orthodox Church, entrance on Ierosolimskaya [Jerusalem] St. Chaim describes the exact location of the ghettos. The Germans hanged Jews near the entrance to the ghetto to instill fear of the punishment for those who tried to avoid moving to the ghetto. They also hanged Jews from the balconies, like laundry, or in another passage of the interview, like sausages; they were left hanging for days. These are Chaim's/Sergei's most horrific memories of the ghetto.

Initially, the Germans recruited his father for work but one day he did not come home. Someone saw the Germans apprehend him, and no one knows what happened to him.

Chaim lived by trading valuables (gold, silver, watches) and clothing for food from the local villagers. He got in and out of the ghetto by going through a hole in the barbed wire (near his house). Jews wore a yellow star, front and back, and could go from one ghetto to the other with a pass. Some guards were decent and looked the other way. Chaim says that the Austrian, Italian and Spanish guards were good. At one point an Austrian cook gave him food.

Cultural life went on in the Grodno ghettos, despite the hunger and death all around. There was a theater, music and political debates. According to Chaim, the

ghetto was a great equalizer as rich and poor lived together and shared what they could. Rabbis pronounced that this was their fate.

Chaim witnessed beatings at the ghetto guardhouse, humiliations and torture of old people (scalping). One Jew hid in the basement of a mill; just before liberation he was found and shot. Jewish police carried out German orders and clubbed their fellow Jews and drove them into the ghetto. He saw columns of Jews walking to their execution, like cattle to a slaughterhouse, while a rabbi told them that it was their fate to die. From nearby peasants he heard about the killing fields where Jews were taken at night and shot. One day as he was gathering wild strawberries, he fell into a ravine. He saw arms sticking up from the ground, a telltale sign of a mass execution.

In 1943 his mother, fearing the worst [perhaps hearing about the liquidation of the ghetto], told Chaim to leave the ghetto, go to a village and get work as a cowherd. Chaim tells of his adventures working in the village, sneaking back to the ghetto at night, avoiding the guards, the 6:00 p.m. curfew, and the searchlights, as Jews out of the ghetto without authorization were summarily shot. He also avoided mass killings in the fields outside town. Some villagers were supportive, telling him to sleep in the hay lest he be shot or sent to a concentration camp. Others were treacherous: One villager suggested that Chaim spend the night with him and return to the ghetto in the morning. However, the villager's daughter told Chaim to leave because her father had reported to the police on him.

One day Chaim learned that his mother was to be deported. He wanted to join her but someone told him to stay away. He left Grodno for the forests and changed his name. [Though he doesn't say so explicitly, **this is where Chaim Shapiro becomes Sergei Petrovich.**] He told villagers that he was the son of a Soviet officer who was killed in battle and whose mother had been killed in bombing. Nevertheless, he was apprehended and sent with a group of Jews on a train to Białystok; when changing trains for Łomża, he escaped and the Germans did not notice.

He returned to villages near Grodno and worked again as a cowherd. Again, he avoided being apprehended when a villager tipped him off about a search for Jews [presumably the "Jew hunts" conducted in Poland at that time].

At the end of the interview, Chaim/Sergei comments on the partisans. Before the ghettos were liquidated in 1943, the partisans were only very small groups and not effective; official detachments were not formed until 1943. In answer to a question about Jewish resistance, Chaim/Sergei says that there was no uprising as there was in Warsaw. He also adds that there were 23,000 POW's in Grodno, many of whom were deserters from the Soviet army.

Postwar

Grodno was liberated by the Soviet army in June, 1944. Sergei lived in an orphanage. He went back to school and then held a variety of jobs, mainly in construction. He heard that two of his mother's brothers had emigrated to America before the war but, not knowing his mother's maiden name, he could never find them.

Appendix

Through Yandex.ru, the volunteer summarizing this interview found the Russian Wiki entry on the Grodno ghetto. In it is a quotation from a Chaim Shapiro:

По свидетельству выжившего Хаима Шапиро: «Надели желтые звезды Давида спереди и сзади. Ходили только по проезжей части. Плевали на нас, могли убить, если немец поймает. И поляки тоже издевались страшно. Мы были люди вне закона. Бывало, встанешь утром, идешь и смотришь — повешенные на балконах...»

In English this reads: According to the eyewitness Chaim Shapiro, “We wore the Star of David, front and back. We could walk only on the streets [that is, they were forbidden to walk on the sidewalks]. They spat at us. If a German caught us we could be killed. And the Poles also mocked us terribly. We were outlaws. You could get up in the morning, go out, and see [Jews] hanging from the balconies. . . .”

[The last sentence is word-for-word in the taped interview.]

This quotation is not in the English-language Wiki article on the Grodno ghetto.