

Isaak Ashmian	Duration: 36:09	Russian Vets, Interview date Nov 22/2010
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- 00 00 **Isaak:** I was born on December 19, 1919 in the city of Kharkov, Ukraine. Soon after I was born my parents moved to Moscow, and I lived all my life in Moscow. My full name is Isaak Moiseevich Ashmian.
- 00 22 During the war I was a student. Well, in 1941 I was a 3rd year student at Moscow Railway Transport Engineering Institute. When the war began, on July 3rd we were sent to the front to build defensive installations.
- 00 47 We stayed there for 3 months. After that the senior students were sent to Moscow to finish their studies. The junior students were left at the front. I was a 4th year student, so I was sent to Moscow.
- 01 12 We were sent from the front to Moscow on September 15th. On October 6th a German offensive started, even earlier. Moscow was threatened. We faced evacuation. It's a long story.
- 01 39 I am not going to go into it. Our Institute among other institutions of higher education was evacuated to Novosibirsk. In Novosibirsk there was an Institute of Military Transport Engineering, which our Institute joined.
- 02 00 We stayed there for a year until they sent us back to Moscow. The situation in Moscow eased and we returned to Moscow. In June '44 I defended my diploma project and graduated from the Institute. After that I was sent to the front.
- 02 18 I volunteered to go to the front from considerations... I thought (laughs) I would get married...common sense and enthusiasm...I would get married, have children, they would ask me "Dad, where were you during the war?" (laughs), the way you ask me now.
- 02 43 I thought "Am I going to tell them I stayed in Moscow?" I could have stayed in Moscow, because in Moscow there was a construction of a subway section. My specialty was tunnels and bridges. We were offered to stay and work in that construction.
- 02 58 I declined and asked to be sent to the front. And so I was sent to the front, at the command of the Authority of Military Reconstruction Works, 1st Belarussian Front. I was there till the end of the war. After the end of the war we were sent to the home front, to reconstruct bridges in Caucasus, on the Kuban river.
- 03 25 That's my story. Engineer-lieutenant. Repeat? (Interviewer) During my service at the front my rank was "Engineer-lieutenant". As I started telling you in that room, there are four types of bridge reconstruction. When troops are advancing and a river is in their way, they force a crossing over the river...
- 03 56 ...by setting up temporary pontoon bridges made out of separate floating bridges. The troops use them to cross over the river. These bridges are of a very low capacity. That's why we start a temporary reconstruction. A temporary bridge is being built.

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04 25		The deadlines used to be very tight. Large number of men was sent to bridge reconstruction works. It took us 1 or 2 weeks to reconstruct large bridges over major rivers, I mean railway bridges used for trains loaded with machinery, food, etc..
04 55		And so the troops were supplied with all the necessary resources. After the war the bridges underwent capital reconstruction. The temporary bridges are dismantled and undergo capital reconstruction with concrete, metal, etc..
05 20		So our job was the temporary reconstruction of bridges. We were given a task: here's the river, you are to have the bridge ready for trains by the end of the week. That's what we were doing. We were under the German fire, as the Germans were interested in ruining the supplies for the advancing units.
05 46		We were protected by anti-aircraft artillery, etc.. Despite the fact that we underwent aviation and artillery bombardments we continued doing our job. We made use of local materials, cutting down the surrounding woods. Local population was mobilized to perform the digging and other unskilled labour.
06 23		A lot of people were involved there. Plus a lot of military units including ours were involved in bridge reconstruction. We worked on the Ukraine/Western Belarus border, later on moving to Poland. A month before the war ended we were sent to the home front,
06 54		...because the front line was being reduced at that time. As many units were extra, we were sent to the home front to work in capital construction. That's my story, in short.
07 15		Did they know that I was a Jew? Of course they did. We didn't feel uncomfortable. I am speaking for myself. I wasn't the only Jew there. There were Jewish guys there. As far as I know, the share of the Jewish men awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union was 3 rd biggest.
07 46		As far as I know 150 Heroes of the Soviet Union per 500,000 Jews participating in the war. 250,000 were killed in the war. A lot of high commanders too – generals, admirals, lower level commanders. Jews were among the most active participants. (Interviewer).
08 22		(Interviewer) I know, when I lived in Moscow I was a member of the Council of Jewish War Veterans/invalids. I know, I read literature. The Jews were fighting to protect the country they were citizens of. Nowadays we are more sceptical having the information about the Stalin era.
08 50		At that time we were patriots. I am not the president, I'm the vice-president. Our president's name is Yakov Lvovich Rats. I am his assistant. Our association membership is about 330-350 members – war veterans. Beside those who fought at the front, there are also partisans, Leningrad blockade survivors, those who worked at the home front.
09 36		All of them are members of our Association. Besides, ghetto and German concentration camps survivors are also members of our Association. (Interviewer) Canadian Association of WWII veterans from ex Soviet Union.

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This is the official name of our organization. Well, of course time goes by, people are getting older. Our average age is approximately 85 years, members of our Association.

- 10 15 And the level of activity is lower than before. However, we mark all the war related events and memorable dates. On December 9th we mark the anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad and the Battle of Moscow.
- 10 34 And so we mark all the remarkable war events. We celebrate the Victory Day: we go to the Sheppard Park, hold a grand meeting, lay flowers on the monument, afterwards we go to a restaurant to have a reception and dinner.
- 10 56 That's how it is... Oh, and provide material assistance to the members in need, when there are available funds. We have received a significant sponsor's assistance for the recent Victory Day – about \$20,000.
- 11 18 We even received funds from Moscow – from Mr. Luzhkov, the then vice-president of the Association of Compatriots. He sent us – not too much – \$2,500. It took quite a while, but eventually we got the funds.
- 11 44 So we now have available funds to be able to help our members. And then again, we have current expenses too. We went to the military parade downtown Toronto dedicated to the Canadian Army. We were among other countries' veterans –
- 12 11 participating in the parade. We celebrate this kind of events. We didn't think about it, we just did our job, that's all! We were not too proud – we were just doing our duty, trying our best. We were trying to be as efficient as possible, meeting the deadlines.
- 12 40 The deadlines were always very tight. We worked 12-14 hours' shifts. We were honestly carrying out our tasks. What was my job? Bridge construction. Bridges are engineering structures that cannot be constructed without engineer's participation.
- 13 06 There were design engineers who were coming to the sites to design bridges. They were giving us ready parts of the design before the entire design was completed. We carried out construction tasks, coordinating the works.
- 13 27 Engineers! That was the reason we were called from the front in '41 to complete the studies, graduate as engineers and be sent to the front as engineers. There was a need in engineers at war.
- 13 43 I didn't experience it in my unit. But outside of my unit...you know, yes...(Laughs) I recall, when I was in Kiev on business... I was sent from the front to a design organization... I remember, 2 sailors (laughs) seeing me in the railway station, called my "Zhidovskaya morda" (a kike).
- 14 14 That's what was usually said when seeing a Jew. That happened sometimes, but that was not what mattered. And to be honest we didn't experience...I am talking for myself...any persecution against Jews during the war, no I didn't.

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14 31	The war heroes? As I mentioned I was a member of Moscow Association of Jewish War Veterans. Our organization's president was Malinovsky – Hero of the Soviet Union. During the war he was a tank battalion commander.	
14 47	He used to tell us about his heroic combat actions for which he was later awarded Hero of the Soviet Union. His tanks were the first to storm into cities. I don't remember the details he used to tell us about. He told us lots of interesting facts...	
15 14	...and episodes proving his heroism. That's a big word, but that was his real attitude. Judging by his conduct and how many times he was wounded... the last time he was severely wounded – hardly pulled through, being sent to a Moscow hospital during the war.	
15 41	But he recovered and got back to the front where he stayed until the end of the war. Also worth mentioning, his assistant by the name of Ilya Sobol. He was a medical doctor. When I knew him he was a colonel. During the war he must have had a lower rank. He was a commander of a military hospital.	
16 08	He participated in the liberation of Auschwitz. He told all about it. He was among the troops who were the first to come to Auschwitz. He told us about...(Interviewer: what did Malinovsky tell you about?) Unfortunately I can't recall it now. I should have prepared myself for this question.	
16 41	Well, he told us all about combat episodes. About forced crossing of a river, I remember...under very complicated conditions... I'm not prepared to tell you all the details... But what he told us was a real heroism. That I remember.	
17 09	I can't recall all the details... I have books. (Interviewer). Yes, of course. Why, I can tell you about my relatives. 5 or 6 relatives were killed in the war, 2 sailors – my first cousins, an infantry man – a first cousin, his father who was much older than we were, he was also drafted...	
17 40	...and killed in action. All of those who had to be at the front were at the front. I don't know of anybody trying to avoid. I can't tell for all the Jews. Every nation has brave heroes and cowards. Probably there were some among the Jews. But all I can say is that was not typical of the Jews.	
18 19	What was characteristic of the Jews was normal participation in the war, similar to other nationalities. Probably I can say that Jewish contribution was more remarkable, judging by the number of medals awarded to the Jews.	
18 36	Mind that Jews didn't use to be much recommended for medals. So based on his combat heroism, Malinovsky should have been awarded his second title of the Hero of the Soviet Union,	
18 46	whereas he was awarded only one title of Hero. I don't think he got his award smoothly. It would be totally wrong to say that Jews used to hide. We took the most active part. We sustained a lot of casualties. I recall colonel Shapovalov, a gentile, he died in front of me. Some more casualties.	

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19 16	Once we arrived we started digging shelter slits – first thing to do on arriving at a site was to dig shelter slits to hide ourselves from shells and bullets. We work and all of a sudden there starts a shelling or an air raid. Everyone runs away to hide. Once the raid is over – we start our work over.	
19 44	That’s how it was. All the bridges we were building were extremely important for the victory with the intensity and especially with the offensive about to start, every bridge was absolutely essential. Without bridges, the troops would have to retreat.	
20 06	They would have to be left without arms, ammunition, food – all that was essential in the war. The bridges were highly important. We used to be pushed, demanded... The high command used to punish for any delays. There were some negative things – the supplies failing to arrive on time; trucks delivering important parts could be bombed on their way.	
20 44	Everything required big and intensive efforts. But we did our job, we did it. (Interviewer) No, on arrival, we used to mobilize all the local population – all the villages in the vicinity of the site, all men were sent...and women too, the women being sent to digging.	
21 16	They moved earth fill under the railway tracks. While men – carpenters and joiners – were sent to cut and process timber. Local population used to perform unskilled labour. After the war, I worked in bridge construction – all my career.	
21 42	When the war ended we were in the village Kurgannoye, Kuban region, 40 km away from town Armavir, where the river Laba flows, that’s the name of the river – Laba. We began our post-war activities rebuilding that bridge.	
22 03	And a few more bridges along the same line. That’s the line from Armavir to Tuapse ending at the Black sea shore – Tuapse and Sochi being the sea ports; and further on – to Caucasus. That’s where we worked. Those were our first assignments after we were called from the front and sent to the home front.	
22 31	Those were capital bridges made with concrete and metal, etc. Temporary bridges were dismantled, the bridges built earlier...and capital bridges were built. That’s how it was during my career – old bridges reconstruction or construction of new bridges.	
22 53	Reconstruction of old bridges...modernization. (interviewer). I wasn’t a hero. (Laughs) I just did my job. I have nothing to brag about. Sometimes our situation was hopeless. Well, not ours...I can’t speak for everyone, I can only speak for myself.	
23 17	In particular, on July 3 rd , 1941, when we were at the front already, Stalin made his speech, broadcasted on the radio. Those who know the war, they remember it. He made a speech and that was the first time he addressed our people.	
23 36	The war began on June 22, and he made his speech on July 3 rd . He explained the situation. That was the first time we learnt that we were not doing well at	

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the time, that the Germans were advancing fast, that our major cities were occupied, the cities we never thought possible to be occupied by the Germans.

- 23 58 At that moment I was thinking: How come our leaders let it happen? Why hadn't they collected more taxes? I was a young guy and I remember what I was thinking: Why not collect more taxes to provide better for the army? That's what I was thinking.
- 24 29 I recall what I was feeling when in Moscow in October, '41 when the Germans were advancing to Moscow. I read newspapers saying that our situation was dangerous and the Germans had occupied this and that, or cut off this and that road.
- 24 51 I was in a dreadful mood, dreadful! Moscow runs away. I remember being in a railway station – Kursk railway station – seeing the square filled with refugees, waiting for their trains to arrive. There was a panic. The subway didn't work.
- 25 14 The situation was desperate. We, ordinary people, were not 100% sure we would win and the Germans would be stopped from invading Moscow. As we know from the books and the history Hitler was selling invitation cards for a victory parade on the Red Square.
- 25 39 I mean not selling but giving out. We knew how the Germans treated the Jews. One of his principles was annihilation of the Jews. Of course that was giving us courage and an additional strength. We tried to do our utmost to win. When we were at the front the Germans were throwing leaflets.
- 26 08 I remember one of the leaflets I brought to Moscow when I returned from the front the first time. It read: "Beat with a brick a kike and a political instructor". A hooligan, rude and senseless, but a characteristic leaflet. "Beat a kike and political instructor".
- 26 32 The Germans...probably those leaflets were made up by white emigrants – the Russians serving the Germans, judging by the style. No, we had known that the Germans persecuted the Jews. That gave us courage.
- 26 53 It's difficult to characterize. They exchanged their opinions. Soldiers were different. Look, 4 millions were captured in the first place during the first days of the war. That's characteristic. At first time the soldiers...were running away.
- 27 23 Just running. Running away and scattering. Even not running away from the Germans – just scattering and deserting. Afterwards the military authorities started punishing for that introducing proper order. The reason?
- 27 41 The draft. They were liable for military service. There was no difference between me, a Jew and my comrade, a Russian. He was drafted and so was I. (Interviewer). The joy of the victory, or course. We were happy for the victory as the rest of them.

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27 57	We escaped the Holocaust, escaped annihilation. When they started anti-Semitic policy in the country we felt hurt. We didn't believe. I remember when I was a student at the Institute, my friend told me that he knew there was a high authorities' resolution not to admit Jews to the Institute of Foreign Relations.	
28 40	That was the first institute that stopped enrolling the Jews. We couldn't understand why. We thought we were equal. Then there was more and more and more... We know how it ended. '51 - "cosmopolites", the case of the Jewish doctors, liquidation of the Jewish Committee...	
29 13	...Mikhoels, etc, etc.. Anti-Semitism was gaining strength. That's when we experienced anti-Semitism. That was Stalin's policy. In general, anti-Semitism has always existed and will exist in the future. It goes well with and is supported by the people.	
29 42	When Stalin was implementing the policy, he was supported by everyone. Remember the case of the Jewish doctors, when people had fear going to a clinic or a hospital to see a Jewish doctor. People avoided seeking their help. Those are well known facts.	
30 03	(laughs) A tricky question! I don't know, but yes, it did. Circumstances always have an influence...er especially, the anti-Semitic campaign at the end of the '40s in the country and in the '50s. We were immensely hurt, feeling bitter. However it didn't affect my career.	
30 36	I worked as a Technical Department Head all the time. Later on I was promoted to Chief Engineer's position at Bridge Construction Team. It's difficult to answer this question. Apparently it did influence. Hardly. Jewish children can know.	
31 04	(Interviewer). Yes, nowadays kids have no idea of the war history. I don't mean each and every kid. But as a rule, judging by the surveys, based on TV, radio and mass media publications, kids are not able to answer basic questions.	
31 28	The war history is not being taught properly. Jewish kids seem to be better informed, because they are taught by their families about their fathers and grandfathers. But in general kids are not properly informed about the war history.	
31 49	They take little interest in the subject. Our Association in Toronto holds meetings with school students every year. And the kids seem to take interest in what we are telling them, no matter what age they are.	
32 07	Including small kids 9 to 11 and older ones, 14 and 15 year old. They all take interest in what we are telling them. They ask questions, some naïve, some interesting. You have interviewed Zarembo today. He has held a number of meetings.	
32 33	Approximately 10 meeting prior to every Victory Day. We tell the kids about the war, combat episodes, the war history, etc.. They should know that they	

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belong to a nation of brave people. And it's not just the war I participated in. Also the history of Israel denies the lie that the Jews "fought in Tashkent, hiding from the war". These lies have been overturned by the history of the Patriotic War, WWII, and the modern history of Israel.

- 33 18 Kids should know all that and be proud of it. Our countrymen can fight and protect their country. This is of an immense educational importance. Knowing what happened during the war is highly important for the Jewish kids. They can be proud of their ancestors,
- 34 05 ...their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. They should know that they belong to a nation of brave, courageous and dignified people. Have I told about everything? Not too much to add. Please come to us, familiarize yourselves with our work.
- 34 30 (Len, guys, interviewer) this is Order of the Patriotic War. These are mostly anniversary medals. This medal is from Israel. Did I tell you that in Moscow I was in the Association of Jewish War Veterans? And in 2005 when there was the anniversary of our victory, the Israelis awarded us with medals.
- 35 45 (Interviewer). All the civilized countries recognized the merits of the Jewish people in that war. I wasn't awarded by any country other than Israel. Only Israel.
- 36 09 End of interview.