

Mikhail Lakrits	Duration: 54:47	Russian Vets, Interview date Nov 16/2010
00 00	Mikhail: My name is Mikhail Leonidovich Lakrits. I was born in the town Derazhnia, Khmel'nitsk Region, Ukraine. My date of birth is March 24, 1922. In '29 I entered a Russian school. I finished the school in '37.	
00 43	I finished 7 grades. My sister took me to Kolomna near Moscow. I got a job at a factory. The factory sent me to Moscow, to study at the machine-tool college. In '39 I finished my studies at the college and returned to the factory.	
01 14	After awhile I was drafted to the army, in February, '41, before the war. (Interviewer). Military? Moscow Military Commissariat sent me to the town Tartu, Estonia to study at SMAS – a school for junior aviation specialists.	
01 55	I stayed there until the war began – on the 22 nd , of rather 21 st of June. On the 22 nd , we were taken to the airport and further to the river Tartula – to take up a defensive position.	
02 21	The Germans had already advanced close to Tartu. The dates were 23 rd -24 th of June, 1941. That was my first encounter with the Germans. I was 19 at the time. We were defending the town Tartu. On the night of 24-25 of June, infantry units came to replace us, the aviators.	
02 55	We were taken to a military airport to be put on a truck and driven to the town Narva and further to the city Pskov. From Pskov I was sent to an aviation unit – 151 long-range bomber regiment, and further to the town Markstadt, on the river Volga. I sustained a leg injury while on my way to the town Markshtadt.	
04 05	I was sent to a hospital in Saratov – 312 evacuation hospital in Saratov. After staying there for 1.5-2 months I was sent to the aviation reserve in Markshtadt where I stayed until April, '42.	
04 30	I was wounded and taken to the hospital on December 12. (Interviewer) In aviation. There was Mogilev infantry college in Volsk. I was invited to enrol in the college for an officer's training. I declined saying that I already had a gunner/radio-operator training and that I wanted to serve in the aviation.	
05 22	I had had 8 parachute jumps and 3 or 4 shooting practices, and I was considered a specialist. I was sent back to the aviation reserve. Later I got a second invitation. I was a gunner/radio-operator, an SB-3 bomber's crew. My combat task was shooting at the enemy, not letting the enemy, a Messerschmitt, attack our plane.	
06 40	I was eager to be in the aviation as I had already had experience – not combat but training experience. I declined the invitation for the second time. I was sent to the draft reinforcements. The draft reinforcement company was formed in Volsk, near Volga.	
07 17	I got to the draft reinforcement company with the sergeant's rank. Being a sergeant, I was appointed a squad commander. We were positioned at the North-Western Front. We were sent to bombard the German columns approaching Kaliningrad and Belarus.	

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- 07 49 I sustained a wound and was sent to the hospital. After the hospital I was sent to the aviation reserve. When I got to the draft reinforcement company, a battalion was formed there. I was a squad commander. (Interviewer). I sustained a leg wound, a missile wound.
- 08 25 I got to the draft reinforcement company. A battalion was formed there. We were put on a train to go to the Volkhov Front near Leningrad. As I was a sergeant and a squad commander, the reconnaissance chief said "I am going to appoint you a reconnaissance squad commander".
- 09 13 So that's how I was appointed a rec squad commander. I was a rec squad commander during the months of April, May, June, July and August. We went on missions behind the enemy lines to collect information required by the army.
- 09 47 My squad captured 8 Yazyks (prisoners who will talk), including 1 officer. I was awarded 2 medals for Courage. The last episode was our capturing a German without knowing what his rank was. We picked him from a bus, he was asleep, and we wrapped him in a raincoat. We put boots on him and made him walk.
- 10 39 We were in a forest. We brought him in and turned him in to the HQ. It was at night. We returned to our unit early in the morning. Our rec commander and company commander came to us thanking for a valuable Yazyk. He turned out to be an officer.
- 11 06 We picked up all his documents from the bus he was on, including his maps which turned out to be very valuable information. On September 8, '42 all the rec men were sent to help the infantry capture a height near a railway embankment.
- 11 36 During the fight I sustained a severe shrapnel wound. I got to a medical battalion, further to a hospital in Volkhov and further on to the city Vologda. Would you like me to tell you about this episode?
- 12 20 A new German battalion arrived at our section of the front. My squad was given an assignment to capture a Yazyk to obtain information on the new German battalion. The location was 7th and 8th workers settlements near Volkhov, Leningrad area.
- 12 57 We were given an assignment to capture a Yazyk. We went into the woods to capture a German who was off guards. We walked until we saw a bus guarded by a guard. We were three. We crawled up quietly to the bus and silenced the guard. After taking down the guard I got a signal that all was clear.
- 13 37 The three rec men and I approached the bus, opened the door and entered the bus. When we entered the bus we saw a man sleeping in there. We didn't know what his rank was. When I turned on my pocket light, he asked in German: "Who's here?"

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14 08	We leaned all our weight on him. I felt under the pillow and found his pistol "Parabellum". We gagged him, put a bag on his head and wrapped him in a raincoat. We carried him on our shoulders moving quickly to the forest. Two of us remained in the bus. I ordered them to go through the place, pick up all the papers there,	
14 47	and pick up the maps I had seen lying on the table. They picked everything up. They caught up with us when we were in the forest. After that we put the boots on him and made him walk with us. Early in the morning we reached our position.	
15 16	Our squad members were meeting us on our way back. We got to the unit bringing the Yazyk with us. He turned out to be an officer. In September the first attempt to break the Leningrad siege was made near Volkhov. I sustained a wound.	
15 50	I got to the hospital with a severe wound – 442 evacuation hospital in the city of Vologda. (Interviewer) It was not my decision, I was just a soldier carrying out commanders' orders (chuckling). We were at war and that was my job. I was performing my responsibilities.	
16 15	I didn't think of it in terms of heroism. I performed my commander's orders. I was given orders by the rec platoon and rec company commanders. I was doing my job. Of course it was frightening. But despite the fear I had to figure it out how to perform the task.	
16 52	I used to pray to God and my mother, saying it in Yiddish: "Gotenu and Mame", and they saved my life. I am grateful. After the hospital I was sent to Arkhangelsk Military District. (Interviewer). After the medical commission. Of course, I feared for my life!	
17 29	Besides, I was responsible for the lives of 9 men, my subordinates. They were excellent rec men. We were taking care of one another, protecting against accidents. We were friends, my squad and I. Everyone was responsible for everyone. And God forbid anything went wrong we took action right away.	
18 02	And then again, to tell you the truth I used to be a hooligan since I was a kid. When at the college, I was always eager to show off. I was like that all the way. During the war I made it a point: first think it over, then do what you commanders want you to do.	
18 44	That's that. (Interviewer). Of course they did know! Of course they did! They knew that I was a Jew. They knew it by my face (chuckling) and my last name. "Lakrits" with a "ts" or an "s". The "s" is the Latvian way of spelling. "TS" is the ending of the name Lakrits.	
19 20	Our rec chief once asked me "Listen Lakrits, what's your nationality?" I said "I am a Jew, OK?" He goes "Of course OK, you are such a good guy!" I was very athletic, strong and energetic.	
19 46	When I was on the echelon train moving to the front, I was a squad commander, commanding half of the train car. They all obeyed me. Obviously	

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the echelon commander and the battalion commander characterized me properly as a squad commander.

- 20 06 That's why I was appointed a squad commander. There was another Jew in my squad by the name of Lev Levin. I sent him to the front line time after time to make him have the feel, to get him know the smell of powder so to say.
- 20 34 They knew about it. However I didn't get too close with him. He was one of us, just doing his job and fulfilling his responsibilities. Go on? Sergeant. Yes, I was a sergeant, a reconnaissance squad commander, a reconnaissance squad commander. Reconnaissance is army's eyes and ears.
- 21 21 If reconnaissance was doing a good job, the army knew what kind of an enemy was in front of them. The army was able to figure out and plan how to conduct a combat.
- 21 36 The reconnaissance was providing the army with essential information about the enemy they faced, either attacking or defending against. Based on the reconnaissance information the defensives and offensives were planned.
- 21 57 The reconnaissance is army's eyes and ears. After the hospital I was given restrictions 2nd category, meaning I was fit for military service with restrictions. I had restrictions because of 2 shrapnels in my right lung: when I was breathing, the air with ichor was coming out from under the right shoulder blade.
- 22 40 After the medical commission I was sent to the Arkhangelsk Military District. I have all my unit numbers here, written down, I can say them. (Interviewer). During one of the offensives, the task was to capture a height. Everyone available, including rec men and staff workers were sent to capture the height.
- 23 20 The height was difficult to capture because the Germans had dug in and it was hard to push them out. The Germans were shooting the missiles from the railway embankment. They used mortars, machine guns and submachine guns to shoot at our troops.
- 23 42 That was their stronghold. The infantry had difficulty capturing the height. We were sent to assist them in capturing the height. That was the beginning of the first attempt to break the siege of Leningrad. Yes, that was the first attempt to break the siege of Leningrad. That was the September Battle.
- 24 16 I have all the unit numbers here, written down. I can read them all. I was there on September 8th. Which location? (Interviewer: which battle?) When we approached the railway embankment the Germans started retreating. They started leaving the first points.
- 24 40 They were retreating under the mortar fire. (Interviewer: where were you heading?) To capture the height, a railway embankment. When we had moved closer the firing... (Interviewer) I was hit with mine shrapnel.

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25 04		We weren't able to raise our heads. Yes, yes, the breakthrough, the first September Battle. I repeat, I was sent to a medical battalion. The orderlies put me on stretchers to get me... the rec men were helping them...
25 35		I'm not sure how many. We lost 1/3 of the rec personnel of our company, see? I was taken to the medical battalion located in the forest and further to Volkhov which was the closest. In Volkhov I stayed for a week.
26 09		I was sent from Volkhov to 442 evacuation hospital, Vologda. I stayed there the months of September, October, November, December, January, February, March, April and May. In May I was examined by a medical commission who sent me to the Arkhangelsk Military District.
26 37		Further I was sent from Arkhangelsk to the city of Kotlas. A tank college was being formed in Kotlas at the time I got there. A tank college was being formed in Kotlas.
27 00		I was made to enrol in the college instead of rehabilitation. The program was 9 months long. On finishing the college I was promoted...in '43...er...in November, '44 I was promoted to the rank of sublieutenant, tank forces.
27 45		I was sent to the city of Gorky where tank battalions were being formed at the time. After the battalion was formed we were put on an echelon to go to the 1 st Ukrainian Front. With the 1 st Ukrainian Front I participated in the defence of Austria and Czechoslovakia.
28 21		During the defence of the town Kaplitsa, Czechoslovakia, German tanks attacked our tank battalion. We opened fire at the tanks. My platoon knocked out 3 tanks – an armoured vehicle and 2 tanks. It happened at the end of April, '45.
29 14		We had already crossed our border line entering Austria and Czechoslovakia. At the end of April I was recommended for an award. I was awarded Order of Patriotic War, 2 nd class for that battle. The end of the war saw me there, in Czechoslovakia. (Interviewer)
29 56		Sublieutenant. Later I was promoted to lieutenant. As a lieutenant I was sent to Russia. Our 40 th division was sent to the Carpathian Military District, Ukraine. The district HQ Staff was located in Lvov. I was sent to 38 th Army, Carpathian Military District.
30 28		The army was located in Stanislav (Now Ivano-Frankovsk). As a rec man and a tank man I was sent to a reconnaissance battalion in Kamenets-Podolsk and further to Chernovtsy. In Chernovtsy I was promoted to lieutenant. In '53 I was sent to study in Leningrad.
31 05		Rather I was sent there in '51. In '53 I graduated from High Officers' School for Automobile/Armoured Troops being promoted to captain. When I came to our 66 th division in Chernovtsy, I was appointed commander of maintenance and repair station.

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31 36	I was appointed commander of the station. (Interviewer: what year were you promoted to captain?) Eh? (Interviewer repeats question) Captain? In '5...'5...'57. The major battle took place at the Volkhov Front, near Leningrad. The location was 7 th and 8 th workers' settlements,	
32 09	near Volkhov. The battle was fierce. The location was swampy. We were bogged in the swamps. We had to jump from hummock to hummock (kochki) while on rec missions. Sometimes we fell into the water. That was hard. I'm sorry.	
32 39	That was the hardest time. It was easier on board of tanks, when in Czechoslovakia. For us the war ended on May 12 th . The end of the war was officially announced on May 9 th . At that time our battalion and our division were fighting against the army group of the German general Schorner.	
33 13	Besides, we were fighting against separate Vlasov's groups (Russian soldiers fighting on the German side). Our troops were gradually destroying the Vlasov's army, while they were putting up a fierce resistance. Those were hard battles.	
33 39	Those were my battles. (Interviewer). First in Austria. First of all we liberated the Mauthausen concentration camp with lots of Jews and Polish. Mauthausen was located near Linz on the river Danube. There was a battle to liberate the concentration camp,	
34 14	the Mauthausen concentration camp. All the Germans had run away, so we could hardly find the commandant – a sergeant major in charge of the place. The rest of the Germans had run away. We captured 12 Germans there, but not the commandant. Later we were told that he was caught in Linz. Horrible, horrible!	
34 59	There was a laboratory in the Mauthausen concentration camp where human bodies were cut. Also they had storage of footwear and bags full of human hair. There were lots of dead bodies in stone quarries. We didn't stay there for a long time though. We were a tank battalion.	
35 38	We left soon. And soon there arrived those who cleaned the camp up. A commission came to make a report on Germans' atrocities. We were taken out quickly. We were sent from Austria to Czechoslovakia. In Czechoslovakia the fight went on. (Interviewer).	
36 06	We saw few people there. Most of the people had been sent some other place. We found Polish people, 2 Hungarians, and a Frenchman. Along with us came people who were handling the case. I didn't see Jews there. No, I didn't.	
36 42	But there had been lots and lots of Jews there before. (Interviewer). Famished, all skin and bones. A Polish woman was experimented upon: her skin was removed from her palm and the remains grew in (claps his hands). When given food, she ate like an animal.	
37 12	That was so terrible! My hair stood on end.	

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37 17		The most frightening? The most frightening moments were when we were on our way from Estonia to Narva. There were air raids, many people were wounded and killed. That's when I realized what was war's grief and tears.
37 36		I saw my comrades getting wounded and killed – some of them were my classmates from the college. Second most frightening moment was at the Volkhov Front. And other frightening episodes occurred in Austria and Czechoslovakia. Those were 3 really frightening episodes.
38 02		By the way, having gone through the horrors of Czechoslovakia and Austria, my hair grew grey. That's what I went through. I ended up being promoted to Engineer-Major in '62. I served till '66. In '66 I retired after long service.
38 38		I had served for 26 years. After long service I was dismissed and transferred to the reserve and eventually placed on the retired list. That was all my service. Later on I was... I didn't know that the Germans had murdered my parents!
39 01		My mother and father were killed in Derazhnia; my older sister was killed there too. My brother was killed during a defensive near Vinnitsa. I didn't know. I only had 2 sisters: Raisa and... oh and my brother Boris was killed too.
39 22		Raisa or Raya and Genia lived in Moscow, rather in Kolomna near Moscow. They moved to Shostka, Sumy Region, Ukraine. I mean when her husband's artillery unit was taken out of Germany they relocated to Shostka, Sumy Region, Ukraine.
39 48		In December '46 I was on my first vacation. I went to Shostka to meet with my sisters there. I was introduced to a nice girl by the name of Manya. We got married and had 2 children: son and daughter, born in '48 and '52.
40 23		...(Speaking of the Jews in Derazhnia) They were killed, more than 3,800 Jews were killed in the Derazhnia's ghetto, at the brick factory. I have a document, a copy of an official letter. ...Jews... 2 memorials...2 graves where the Jews were buried and 2 memorials.
41 03		...in '47... It happened in Derazhnia, Khmel'nitsky Region, Ukraine. The town Derazhnia was situated between Zhmerinka and Khmel'nitsky. Railway station Derazhnia, town Derazhnia. That's where they were killed, rather they were murdered.
41 22		About my first aviation mission. We were young... we were sent on a mission to bombard a column. It was close to Belarus: Bobruysk, Minsk... Rather not Minsk, only Bobruysk...Bobruysk... We threw bombs and were on our way back.
41 52		When we were on our way back all of a sudden two Messerschmitts appeared from behind the clouds and started shooting at us. I started firing back not to let them get close to our plane.

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42 09	At that moment a burst of machine-gun fire hit our plane. The navigator was severely wounded. I sustained a leg wound too. That's all. The plane commander flew the plane back to the airdrome near Staraya Russa, managing to land the plane there.	
42 52	I was pulled out of the plane and sent to the hospital right away... a medical battalion and then a hospital... I participated in the first attempt to break the siege. Later other troops broke the siege of Leningrad: The Volkhov Front, the Leningrad Front and ...er...what's the name...er...The Northern Front, closer to Finland.	
43 24	The fronts I mentioned and the Baltic Front – they participated in the breach of the siege of Leningrad. I didn't participate in that. I participated in the first attempt only. But nonetheless I was awarded Medal for the Defence of Leningrad.	
43 48	And the last one – for Leningrad. The Germans' goal was to capture Leningrad first and then to capture Moscow, the blitzkrieg. Their failure to capture Leningrad led to the siege of Leningrad. So many people died in Leningrad, from famish and bombings.	
44 27	It was horrible in Leningrad. I wasn't there. I was at the Volkhov Front. I got to Leningrad after the war in order to study at the High Officers' School. There were many...there were many...500,000 Jews fought in the Soviet-German war.	
44 59	Total 1,500,000 Jews participated in WWII...fighting Nazism. 200,000 out of 500,000 were killed. Almost 40% of Jews were killed. A lot of Jewish blood...Beside the Jewish blood at the fronts, 6 million were killed in the Holocaust.	
45 36	Germans' first goal was liquidation of all Jews. After liquidation of all Jews they were aiming to capture Russia, France, and Britain. Their goal was to capture Europe and further on. Those were Hitler's plans. His books "Mein Kampf", right? Everything is written there.	
46 16	That was horrible. There were many generals, many officers, and very smart too. Jews were knowledgeable and smart. They were artillery men, who were supposed to know how to calculate the target. They were in tank troops, the technical personnel.	
46 50	Automobile troops too, the aviation, etc. So many Jews – Heroes of the Soviet Union in the aviation: pilots, gunner/radio operators, navigators. There were so many Jews – engineers working for airdrome maintenance crews, technical personnel.	
47 20	And not just airdrome maintenance – all the aircraft armament too. Many Jews were in the aviation technical services. In Russia? In Russia...in Russia before the war...before the war there was no sense of oppression against the Jews.	

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47 44	The Jews had access to public education. I was a school student in a small Ukrainian town where there were Ukrainians, Polish and Jews. There was no difference between us, no anti-Semitism, honestly.	
48 07	I remember when I was a kid there was no difference, we were friends. After the war...Hitler spread anti-Semitism. Hitler...Hitler left poison, Nazi poison...against the Jews.	
48 34	And the Russians imbibed the poison turning against the Jews. As for my service in the reconnaissance – probably I was infringed in terms of awards. My surname "Lakrits" might have been the reason I wasn't given more awards.	
49 00	All the rec men in my squad were given awards. And after the war... I didn't sense oppression in the army, honestly. I was doing my job. All my life I was just doing my job. After the retirement from the army I worked in the Regional Agricultural Equipment Association for 21 years.	
49 25	21 years in the Agricultural sector. I didn't sense... Local Ukrainians, especially the western Ukrainians...in Ivano-Frankovsk, Stanislav, they too. Like in Poland... They used to call us "Zhyd", not Jews.	
49 47	That's how they treated us. I didn't sense it in relation to myself. Jewish heroes? It doesn't come to me. If I knew you were going to ask me this questions I would have prepared myself.	
50 01	I was a soldier just carrying out my commanders' orders and just doing my job. It was my job. I was a patriot of our country – the Soviet Union. I was defending my country and my parents, my family, right? That was my job.	
50 36	I was a Soviet Army soldier. In Israel I was... we applied for emigration to Israel and were denied. The OVIR (visa and registration department) didn't give me permission.	
50 52	Why? Because my last job was commandant of a rocket area...commandant...Everything that had to do with rockets... he said "No". I'd like to tell you how I got to Canada.	
51 10	After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Bendera and nationalists raised their heads in the Western Ukraine. They made speeches in the streets saying "Moskali (Russians) and "Zhydy"(Jews), go away from Ukraine!"	
51 45	"Go away from Ukraine". I read about it. I wasn't sure it had anything to do with me, because I worked at the time. My daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren – our dearest – moved to Canada.	
52 11	I made a decision that it was dangerous for my wife and I to stay in Ukraine any longer. My daughter sponsored us, being our guarantor for 10 years. And so we moved to Canada with our daughter's sponsorship. I applied for visas with OVIR. The OVIR manager told me I had no business going to Israel. Still he signed my application for Canada.	

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- 52 51 It was in '95, in 1995. I didn't retire until the year '95, when I was 72. I worked... On June 7th, '95 my wife and I moved to Canada. We arrived in Canada. We have been living here for 15 years now. We live with our children.
- 53 28 We live with our daughter and son-in-law. Our son is also here in Canada. He is with his family. We have 3 grandchildren and 5 great grandchildren! I am 88 years old. I do my prayers, go to the synagogue and ask for good health for my family and myself. And I say in my prayers "Shalom Israel".
- 54 09 I pray for peace in Israel. I am a Canadian citizen. I consider myself a Jew first of all and a law-abiding Canadian citizen, second of all. Russian? (chuckling). I am a former citizen of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. A former citizen. I don't consider myself Russian. (Len: a very good interview).

End of interview