

**Vladimir Shechtman**

**Russian Vets**

**Vladimir Shechtman1**

Duration 15:38

- 00 00 I was born in town Orsha, Belarus, in '26. In '34 we moved to an area near Moscow. I went to school there. I completed 7<sup>th</sup> grade. In '41 the war broke out. We evacuated to Tatarstan... 00 26
- 00 26 ...Town Arsk, 50 km away from Kazan. In October '43 I was drafted to the army. I was sent for a 2 months long training program at a driving school. After that we were brought to Moscow. 00 53
- 00 53 We were given Studebakers, American vehicles. We were sent to the 1<sup>st</sup> Belarusian Front. We passed by Kovel, Rovno, the passenger stations...we got off the train at a freight station. 01 18
- 01 18 I mean we drove off. We parked the vehicles. First of all we started burying the vehicles. After that we dug trenches for ourselves. We made a big hut for a 6-men squad. 01 35
- 01 35 Well I took my first post – guarding the vehicles. Afterwards I was relieved. I went to bed. All of a sudden my bunk bed collapsed. I opened my eyes and saw the daylight. 02 00
- 02 00 I thought to myself "What a good sleep I've had!" I looked up and saw 2 parachutes hanging. Those were big parachutes for people. When I looked down I saw a flare. 02 14
- 02 14 There was nobody around. Everyone was in the trench we had dug earlier. My carbine stood near a tree. I grabbed the carbine and rushed down to where the people, the guys were. 02 27
- 02 27 As it turned out, the railway station traffic controller was working for the Germans. At night a train with tanks arrived. I was serving in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tank Army. 02 41
- 02 41 They started unloading the tanks. And the traffic controller somehow got in touch with the Germans. German planes came flying and threw bombs. Well they didn't hit the tanks. 02 56
- 02 56 However there were 2 train cars with maps and other papers. They caught fire and burnt down. And through that small forest... We started suffocating...There weren't any officers around. 03 12
- 03 12 And then an officer came, he was a Jew by the name of Barshai. He was a senior lieutenant. He was like a father to us. He went "Guys, get out of the trench. 03 26
- 03 26 Take your places in the vehicles. Close windows and doors and stay there. When there's another air raid, crawl under the vehicle". We had buried the vehicle. "You are not going to be hit by a bomb... I mean by shrapnel... only by a direct hit". 03 41

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- 03 41 And so we sat there. The smoke dispersed. And then we saw our officers walking out of the forest. They had left us without saying a word.03 52
- 03 52 Later, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was formed after coming out of Romania. And so the fighting started at the 1<sup>st</sup> Belarusian Front. Unfortunately I can't recall now all the names of the locations. 04 08
- 04 08 It's been a long time since then. Our Army was advancing successfully. We passed...we reached the Western areas of Ukraine and Belarus annexed in '39. We were advancing in the territory of Ukraine. 04 27
- 04 27 Belarus was OK. While in Ukraine they weren't happy with the Soviet power. That's why they collaborated with the Germans. They shot us in the back. I remember well that one evening the tanks went into the forest. 04 49
- 04 49 There were other vehicles too. I stopped and all of a sudden I saw 4 tanks coming out of the forest, moving one after another. An officer told me to follow them. 05 01
- 05 01 I put my vehicle behind them. The soldiers got on the tank and 4 soldiers got into my vehicle: two of them in the cabin, and 2 otherwise. So we started moving. 05 11
- 05 11 I go "Where are we going?" He goes "They were shooting at us from the forest". And so we came out. The tank men turned the guns. They hit at the forest. 05 22
- 05 22 We turned to the right where a path was. There was an isolated farm nearby without a single men... only women were there, pregnant women, children, etc.: total 4 or 5 families and 2 old men. 05 39
- 05 39 Well, the guys rushed to the houses. They had everyone leave their houses. Captain, our commander, asked them "Where are your men?" "They are in the woods". 05 54
- 05 54 That was who shot us in the back. The officer sent the soldiers to get everyone leave their houses, leaving no one in. The soldiers went into the houses and all they found there was a cat. 06 07
- 06 07 They brought the cat in. The officer ordered the tank guns to aim at the houses. They smashed the farm. They said to the women and old men "Your men have nothing better to do than to shoot at the friends. 06 25
- 06 25 Let them now rebuild your houses". That was something I will always remember. There are also other memories. During the night we drove our tanks into the woods, taking our positions. 06 49
- 06 49 And so we started off. The distance... the distance... it took time to park tanks and other vehicles. I was the second in the column. There was a young guy from Moscow in front of me. 07 00

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- 07 00 He was blown up by a mine.... Blown up... a doctor arrived right away. We rushed there to help him out. He was contused a little. The doctor came. He gave him something to smell. 07 13
- 07 13 Also a sapper arrived at the spot and a captain... rather senior lieutenant, SMERSH, the army KGB. (Chuckling). "What could possibly be the reason... who did it? Nobody had been seen in the area". 07 31
- 07 31 As it turned out... the sapper looked and said "It looks like a homemade bomb. Someone from a nearby house, having a grudge against the Soviets...made a mine and landed it". That's how it was. 07 47
- 07 47 Those were my memories. Later an offensive started. After awhile I saw a border post for the first time. It was bent already. The one side read *Poland* and the other one – *The USSR*. 08 04
- 08 04 And so we started our offensive in the Poland's territory. The offensive was quite rapid. It was easy to advance with the tanks. 4 or 5 tanks went in the front followed by fuel vehicles. 08 21
- 08 21 I was a driver of such a vehicle with fuel for tanks 34. It was solar oil. There were a few American or British tanks: *Sherman* and some other... They ran on higher quality gas. 08 37
- 08 37 They were called... not a very nice name...because unlike the 34 model they were not streamline designed, bullets ricocheting and all...they had a square formed steel made design easy for bullets to pierce. 08 51
- 08 51 They only ran on higher quality gas. If the gas tank was hit, that was it. (chuckling). That was how we advanced in Poland and reached the town of Lublin. 09 04
- 09 04 Well, in Lublin, several tanks in front... engaged in the battle in the suburbs. There were lots of vehicles along the road. There were tanks standing there. And all of a sudden... I saw it for the first time...09 27
- 09 27 ...several tanks were advancing... with a Pole on top of a tank waving a Polish flag and wearing a confederate hat. We were looking at them and suddenly one of the soldiers started yelling "Vasya!!" 09 43
- 09 43 That soldier was his friend Vasya. (chuckling) Some time ago Anders withdrew his army. He didn't want to fight on the side of the Soviets. He took a couple of tanks.09 58
- 09 58 Half of the men...they were 4 there: 2 Soviet tank men and 2 Polish ones. (Chuckling) We ran up to them. They drove to the park. They split right away. A Polish priest came to the Poles. 10 18
- 10 18 The priest was saying his prayers. The Soviet soldiers weren't religious at all. (Chuckling). They approached us; we had a conversation. At that time the tanks set off to leave Lublin. We just followed them. 10 33

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- 10 33 That was what happened then. What else was memorable? Of course it's been many years since then. (chuckling) I'm already old too. I sure have some memories... something comes to mind... 10 52
- 10 52 However it's getting more and more difficult...When approaching Berlin... there was town Kusteln. The Germans ran out of fuel. They buried their tanks. I mean only a gun was sticking out. 11 14
- 11 14 There were considerable casualties... vehicles, tanks, etc. were knocked down too. The battlefield was strewn with machinery. Our army fought its way to Berlin. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> Tank Army was involved in the Berlin Battle. 11 35
- 11 35 Afterwards a part... Berlin was encircled. We just moved on. On April 30<sup>th</sup> the Berlin Battle was over. We fought our way forward for 8 more days. At that time we were advancing more or less rapidly... 12 05
- 12 05 ...because the Allies had landed there. The Germans didn't offer any resistance. We were marching on. There's something I'll always remember. May 8<sup>th</sup> was the Victory Day. 12 23
- 12 23 We were moving on in a column. Suddenly we saw 3 girls standing there. They were traffic controllers. We had signs on our vehicles and tanks. I mean they knew the units each vehicle belonged to. 12 43
- 12 43 We passed by a ravine. They directed me to take a left turn. I made a left turn. I saw a tank in front of me. There was no way of going through. An anti-aircraft gun was on the right side. 12 57
- 12 57 I saw 4 anti-aircraft gunners there: 2 girls were setting up a tent and 2 other girls were busy around the gun. 13 04
- 13 04 Our vehicles were on the left side, those who had entered the place before us. Our sergeant was standing in front talking to an officer, a familiar face, and 2 soldiers. 13 19
- 13 19 The sergeant said "Shechtman, be a guard commander. Take the soldiers to the ravine". I took my carbine and we walked to the ravine. I saw a small house there fenced with 2 rows of barbed wire. 13 42
- 13 42 I saw 2 soldiers standing by the gate. We went down the ravine. The soldiers went off duty. Our soldiers replaced them. I go "What's there in the house?" "We don't know. They ordered us to guard, and we are standing at our post". 13 53
- 13 53 We started climbing up. Suddenly a machine gun started banging with tracer bullets. I turned back and didn't see a single plane. After that anti-aircraft guns fired. 14 08
- 14 08 They didn't use combat shells. Instead they used something like a salute we can see nowadays. We rushed running uphill. We didn't see a single officer. The sergeant was running around, wakening everyone, pulling them out of their cabins. 14 27

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- 14 27 "Take up a defensive position!" We lied down. All of a sudden, a HQ car was seen 150 m away. An officer got out of the car. He waved a paper. He shouted "The war is over!!" Well, something incredible was going on. 14 48
- 14 48 Our machine guns started banging. Anti-aircraft gunners started firing salute. What else? We started firing until we were out of ammunition. At dawn our company commander showed up. We formed a line. 15 15
- 15 15 He read out an order. At first the Germans asked for a cease-fire. Zhukov said "no ceasefire, only unconditional surrender!" They signed unconditional surrender pact. 15 33
- 15 33 And that was the end of the war. (Chuckling). (Just a second) 15 39  
End of file

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Duration 16:32

- 00 00 As for the Jews, there's nothing I can tell you. The fact is I was drafted in Arsk, Tatarstan. They brought boys from Chuvashia's remote places. They didn't even have surnames. 00 16
- 00 16 Well..."What's your name?" "Ivan". "What's your last name". He didn't know. "What's your father's name?" "Andrey". "Aha, Ivan Andreevich Andreev". That's how they enlisted them. 00 31
- 00 31 That's how he went from then on. The guys were great. They didn't know what a Jew was. They knew they were Chuvash, other guys were Tatars, Bashkirs and some Russians among them. 00 43
- 00 43 "What's a Jew?" They didn't know anything about that. So I didn't face this problem. (What about officers?) The officers? When we came to Moscow we were placed to squads and platoons. 01 01
- 01 01 My commander was Junior Lieutenant Volkov. (Chuckling) I think he was an anti-Semite. Right away... Have you ever been to Moscow? Well, you know...ah...what's it called? A park... let me see...01 23
- 01 23 (Gorky?) No. There was a village in the suburbs. There were small houses with an individual toilet. He said "You'll go on these toilets in the park". That was the Petrovsko-Razumovsky Park. 01 41
- 01 41 "Don't make a mess here. Go on those toilets". After awhile the junior lieutenant said to me "Shechtman, go and clean the toilet". Well so I did. What's so difficult there? I just took a bucket of water and that was it. 02 01
- 02 01 Some time later, he said again, "Shechtman, go and clean the toilet". I said "Comrade junior lieutenant, I've just cleaned it". "That's an order!". I made 2 steps, turned around and saw him standing and looking at me. 02 16

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- 02 16 I took off my carbine and said "Where are we going to go?" "To the front". I went "Please note"... I shook my carbine and that was all: I didn't see him till the end of the war. 02 30
- 02 30 He realized that he couldn't treat me like that. I never saw him any more. That's it. Well we were put on board a train to go to the Belarusian Front; there were 2 echelons with vehicles on board. 02 48
- 02 48 After awhile they told us the echelon was smashed by bombs. I met with the guys afterwards. Afterwards we went to... I mentioned...Kovel, Rovno...There were no frictions based on ethnicity or religion. 03 11
- 03 11 Our guys didn't know anything. The only time I heard someone say "Jew" was after the war, in September, '45. Demobilization started. The units were dissolved. 03 31
- 03 31 They gathered those who were still there. They sent them some places. 3 men came to our unit. One of them was a Moldavian, a good guy; one Ukrainian and one Belarusian man. 03 48
- 03 48 The Ukrainian was sent to the kitchen right away. They didn't serve with us for a long time, just about 6 months. The Belarusian was assigned to drive a vehicle. And right away the HQ started the manoeuvres. 04 03
- 04 03 The HQ was analyzing operations. Once we went to the operation site... the military... the HQ officers... Our guys worked as drivers for generals, colonels, who left earlier. 04 23
- 04 23 I worked as a driver for 2 or 3 lieutenants and a couple of captains. I drove them away. I parked the vehicle. When I came back I saw the guys. "What are you doing?" They lighted a campfire. 04 35
- 04 35 They sat around the campfire. There was a sergeant among us who knew lots of funny stories and jokes. We were having fun listening to his stories. I sat down. There was a soldier on my left and a tree stump on my right. 04 48
- 04 48 All of a sudden the Belarusian guy came up to join us. He too worked as a driver for someone. He put his hand on my shoulder, "Well, Jew, move over". I looked back and realized that he was gone. 05 00
- 05 00 I turned around and saw him lying. There was a soldier-driver standing behind me. He was Georgian. He was a thin man, twice as thin as he was. He was tall. He knocked him down all right! 05 16
- 05 16 That was it. I never saw him again. By the way the Georgian served as a driver for Plaskov, the Army Artillery Commander, after the war. Plaskov was a Jew, the Army Artillery Commander. 05 35
- 05 35 We demobilized, while Shervalidze, that was his name, stayed with him. The General protected him as if he was his son. (After the war, when you worked there was the Doctors' case in the 50s).06 01

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- 06 01 I was in the army in Germany. I served in the army in Germany for 5 more years. There was no draft at that time. And those who were born in '26 were left in the army. 06 12
- 06 12 I was... at first...they moved ... what was it called... they moved the reparations out of Germany... they moved the reparations... the equipment to the station, shipping it to the Soviet Union. 06 31
- 06 31 After that, in the same year of '45 I was sent to serve in the motorized company under the Army HQ which was located in town Furstenberg, I mean the HQ. 06 45
- 06 45 Our garage was in the concentration camp Ravensbruck, you may have heard about it. It was probably built back in the '30s. The brick walls were this thick. I'm not sure how tall they were, one couldn't climb up the wall. 07 03
- 07 03 There was a wire on top. There had been a women's concentration camp there. There were barracks there. The first thing we did when we entered the camp... those were... what were they called... the trophy squads...07 22
- 07 22 They started dismantling the barracks to ship them to the Soviet Union. They were used in Siberia. Of course they weren't good... I read an article on-line today...by Shalamov, a writer, and Solzhenitsyn... I read before...07 41
- 07 41 They wrote that it was freezing cold in the barracks. How could they be warm, they had 5cm thick 2 thin plank walls reinforced with sound-absorbing cotton liner in between. 07 55
- 07 55 That was the first thing we took out to use in Siberia. As for the taken out equipment...I was on a leave in '49. I went to see my mother in Arsk. One of the soldiers asked me "Please drop by my parents. Tell them I'm coming soon, I'll have a leave". 08 17
- 08 17 (Inaudible) I went to the station. Freight trains were moving very slowly. I jumped on a footboard. After a 10 minutes ride I saw a station. I got off the train. It was in September or October. 08 34
- 08 34 There wasn't any snow yet. The field had been mowed, harvested. I walked on it. I was shown where the village was. Suddenly I saw a green lawn covered with equipment, all that was taken out. It was piled up there. 08 55
- 08 55 Who knows it may still be lying there. Maybe someone had a good idea to have it melted into scrap: machine tools, generators... this big (shows) (inaudible). 09 08
- 09 08 Some other things I don't even know what they were. I passed by, and entered the village. I stayed overnight there and returned to the train. This was what I saw after the war. 09 20
- 09 20 And I was in the motorized company, Army HQs. I drove a Studebaker. There were about 70 men in our company. We lived in that camp. There was a 2-

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- storey long house on the approaches to the concentration camp Ravensbruck. 09 42
- 09 42 ... with 2-bed rooms where the officers had lived... not officers... rather camp guards. That had been a women's concentration camp. How did I know? The driveway lead to a gas station on the right... 09 57
- 09 57 ...and a brick house without doors or windows. The gas station was next to it. There were piles...folders with papers lying there; it was the archive. Some one among us could read German. 10 15
- 10 15 He opened a folder and saw: surname, first name... a woman... it was written she was from France... and all her anatomy information was there. Doctors had examined her...and put everything down. Everything was taken out of course. 10 34
- 10 34 (Were they Jews?) No, they weren't. They were women from all over the world. One of them was a Frenchwoman. There were Jews there too. There might have been Jews there, I'm not sure. 10 47
- 10 47 There was a big barrack on the right. It was tall, looking like a farm barn. That was a gas chamber. There was an undressing room inside there. When the women would enter the undressing room they would be told they would be washed then. 11 04
- 11 04 After that they would be shaved. I saw bags full of human hair and 200 litre containers with ashes lying on the ground. There was a crematorium next to the gas chamber. 11 19
- 11 19 I can't recall now whether there were 2 or 4 furnaces there (chuckling). I looked inside and saw some bones and ashes there... I saw it. Trophy squads arrived right away. 11 33
- 11 33 They took it all away. There were no traces left. The house in front of the camp...we were accommodated in 2-bed rooms. Ah... well... there was a factory there, kind of a textile one. 11 53
- 11 53 It was at the end of the driveway. There was a railway track there too. They took the barracks out and loaded on the railway cars. The factory was removed. The equipment was some kind... well women had worked there. 12 06
- 12 06 They hadn't been cremated right away. They had worked using that equipment. The equipment was also taken away. We used the building as a garage. 12 16
- 12 16 I served there for 5 years. Then a new army draft started. At first they drafted those born in '27 and in '28. The draft began in early '50. Later they moved us from the camp so that we didn't mess around...(chuckling) the zone... 4 or 5 buildings...where the officers had lived . 12 47



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- 12 47 We were placed in one of the buildings. That's where I stayed until my demobilization in November. 12 52
- 12 52 (What did you do after the army?) After the army I came to Moscow and found a job. My aunt and cousin lived in Moscow. My cousin lives in Israel now. 13 13
- 13 13 He was a psychology... psychiatry professor. He isn't young any more (chuckling). He is 7 years my junior. I found a job with the subway. At first I worked as a metal worker. 13 29
- 13 29 After a while I passed an exam for a locomotive driver assistant's position. I worked with the subway for 30 years... the Northern Depot, the first line, Sokolniki, Culture Park, (inaudible) that's where I worked. 13 48
- 13 48 I worked as a locomotive driver assistant, a locomotive driver and a locomotive driver instructor... 10 years, yes... 31 year total, same employer. (Your family?)14 01
- 14 01 My family? I have a wife... I had 2 daughters...the elder one passed away... her daughter is my granddaughter. My younger daughter is going to be 50... ah she's already 50. 14 17
- 14 17 June 7<sup>th</sup> is her and her husband's 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We are going to celebrate here. At fist we lived in New York. My brother-in-law sponsored us... and my granddaughter. Later, my daughter got married. 14 36
- 14 36 She left for Canada. Her husband is in Canada too now. His parents are here too. He is a psychiatrist doctor. When my granddaughter was 15 they took her with them. 14 50
- 14 50 My granddaughter graduated from a Yeshiva in New York... 9 years...Afterwards she was brought here because when she was 16 they weren't supposed to ... they adopted her. 15 06
- 15 06 My granddaughter graduated from a University here and got married. Currently she's in Vancouver. She has recently given birth to our great grandson. 15 18
- 15 18 (Chuckling) He's going to be 1 year old this July. My daughter has 3 sons. One of them is 24, he graduated from a University. He worked for a year on the East Coast. Currently he's found a job here. 15 44
- 15 44 He's on a vacation now touring Japan. He went there to study Japanese (inaudible, noise)... computers. The middle one also graduated from the same University. 15 59
- 15 59 He will... what's it called... he will be mountaineering, doing something. He found a job here. Currently he's in New York, having some training... not sure what it's called. 16 14

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16 14            This is his 5<sup>th</sup> year. He is expected to fly back in early June. The other one is going to finish grade 12 this year. That's my family! My wife and I live separately. We live near the University.16 32

16 32            End of file  
End of interview