

= Alexander Pechersky =

Alexander ' Sasha ' Pechersky (Russian : ?????? ? ??? ??? ? ?????? ????? ? ?????? ; 22 February 1909 ? 19 January 1990) was one of the organizers , and the leader , of the most successful uprising and mass @-@ escape of Jews from a Nazi extermination camp during World War II ; which occurred at the Sobibor extermination camp on 14 October 1943 .

In 1948 Pechersky was arrested by the Soviet authorities along with his brother during the countrywide Rootless cosmopolitan campaign against the Jews suspected of pro @-@ Western leanings . Only after Stalin 's death in 1953 was he released from jail due in part to mounting international pressure . However , the harassment did not stop there . Pechersky was prevented by the Soviet government from testifying in multiple international trials related to Sobibor , including the Eichmann Trial in Israel . The last time he was refused the permission to exit the country and testify was in 1987 , for a trial in Poland .

= = Pre @-@ war life and career = =

Pechersky , a son of a Jewish lawyer , was born on February 22 , 1909 in Kremenchuk , Poltava Governorate , Russian Empire (now Ukraine) . In 1915 , his family moved to Rostov @-@ on @-@ Don where he eventually worked as an electrician at a locomotive repair factory . After graduating from university with a diploma in music and literature , he became an accountant and manager of a small school for amateur musicians .

= = World War II = =

On 22 June 1941 , the day when Germany invaded the Soviet Union , Pechersky was conscripted into the Soviet Red Army with a rank of junior lieutenant . By September 1941 , he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant quartermaster (class II) . In the early autumn of 1941 , he rescued his wounded commander from being captured by the Germans . He didn 't receive any medals for this deed . One of his fellow soldiers reportedly said : " Sasha , if what you 've done doesn 't make you a hero , I don 't know who is ! " In October 1941 , during the Battle of Moscow , their unit was surrounded and captured by the Germans in the pocket at the city of Vyazma , Smolensk Oblast .

Captured , Pechersky soon contracted typhus , but survived the seven @-@ month @-@ long illness . In May 1942 , he escaped along with four other prisoners of war , but they were all recaptured the same day . He was then sent to a penal camp at Borisov , Belarus , and from there to a prisoners of war (POW) camp located in the forest next to the city of Minsk . During a mandatory medical examination it was discovered that he was circumcised . Pechersky recalled a German medical officer asking him : " Do you admit to being a Jew ? " He admitted it , since any denial would result in a whipping , and was thrown into a cellar called " the Jewish grave " along with other Jewish POWs (prisoners of war) , where for 10 days he sat in complete darkness , being fed 100 grams (3 @. 5 oz) of wheat and a cup of water every second day .

On August 20 , 1942 , Pechersky was sent to a SS @-@ operated arbeitslager , a work camp , in Minsk . The camp housed 500 Jews from the Minsk Ghetto , as well as Jewish Soviet POWs ; there were also between 200 ? 300 Soviet inmates whom the Germans labeled as incorrigible : people who were suspected of contacting the Soviet partisans and those who were repeatedly truant while working for the Germans . The prisoners were starved and worked from dawn till dusk . Pechersky wrote about the Minsk work camp :

The German Nazi camp commandant didn 't let a single day pass without killing someone . If you looked at his face you could tell he was a sadist . He was thin , his upper lip shaking and his left eye bloodshot . He always had a hangover or was drunk and committed unspeakable horrors . He shot people for no reason and his favorite hobby was commanding his dog to attack random people who were ordered not to defend themselves . ? Pechersky

= = Sobibor extermination camp = =

On 18 September 1943 , Pechersky , along with 2 @, @ 000 Jews from Minsk including about 100 Soviet Jewish POWs , was placed in a train cattle car which arrived at the Sobibor extermination camp on September 23 , 1943 . Eighty prisoners from the train , including Pechersky , were selected for work in Lager II . The remaining 1 @, @ 920 Jews were immediately led to the gas chambers . Pechersky later recalled his thoughts as the train pulled up to Sobibor , " How many circles of hell were there in Dante 's Inferno ? It seems there were nine . How many have already passed ? Being surrounded , being captured , camps in Vyazma , Smolensk , Borisov , Minsk ... And finally I am here . What 's next ? " The appearance of Soviet POWs produced an enormous impression on Sobibor prisoners : " hungry hope @-@ filled eyes following their every move " .

Pechersky wrote about his first day in Sobibor :

I was sitting outside on a pile of logs in the evening with Solomon (Shlomo) Leitman , who subsequently became my top commander in the uprising . I asked him about the huge , strange fire burning 500 meters away from us behind some trees and about the unpleasant smell throughout the camp . He warned me that the guards forbade looking there , and told me that they are burning the corpses of my murdered comrades who arrived with me that day . I did not believe him , but he continued : He told me that the camp existed for more than a year and that almost every day a train came with two thousand new victims who are all murdered within a few hours . He said around 500 Jewish prisoners ? Polish , French , German , Dutch and Czechoslovak work here and that my transport was the first one to bring Russian Jews . He said that on this tiny plot of land , no more than 10 hectares [24 @. @ 7 acres or .1 square kilometer] , hundreds of thousands of Jewish women , children and men were murdered . I thought about the future . Should I try to escape alone or with a small group ? Should I leave the rest of the prisoners to be tortured and murdered ? I rejected this thought . ? Pechersky

During his third day at Sobibor , Alexander Pechersky earned the respect of fellow prisoners by standing up to Karl Frenzel , an SS senior officer , as the incident was recalled by Leon Feldhendler .

Pechersky , still wearing his Soviet Army uniform , was assigned to dig up tree stumps in the North Camp . Frenzel was in charge because an underling was elsewhere and was in a bad mood . Frenzel was waiting for an excuse to pick on someone since he considered himself an officer and a gentleman and waited for some reason to begin his sadistic games . One Dutch Jew was too weak to chop a stump so Frenzel began beating him with his whip .

Pechersky stopped chopping and watched the whipping while resting on his axe . Kapo Porzyczki translated when Frenzel asked Pechersky if he didn 't like what he saw . Pechersky didn 't bow down , shake or cower in fear but answered , Yes Oberscharfuhrer . Franzel told Pechersky that he had 5 minutes to split a large tree stump in two . If Pechersky beat the time he would receive a pack of cigarettes , if he lost , he would be whipped 25 times . Franzel looked at his watch , and said : Begin .

Pechersky split the stump in four and a half minutes and Frenzel held out a pack of cigarettes and announced that he always does as he promises . Pechersky replied that he doesn 't smoke , turned around and got back to chopping down new tree stumps . Frenzel came back twenty minutes later with fresh bread and butter and offered it to Pechersky . Pechersky replied that the rations at the concentration camp were more than adequate and that he wasn 't hungry . Frenzel turned around and left , leaving Kapo Porzyczki in charge . That evening , this episode of defiance spread throughout Sobibor . This episode influenced the leadership of the Polish Jews to approach Pechersky about ideas for an escape plan . ? Leon Feldhendler

= = = Escape plan = = =

Pechersky 's plan merged the idea of a mass escape with vengeance : to help as many prisoners as possible to escape while executing SS officers and guards . His final goal was to join up with the partisans and continue fighting the Nazis .

Five days after arriving at Sobibor , Pechersky was again approached by Solomon Leitman on

behalf of Leon Feldhendler , the leader of the camp 's Polish Jews . Leitman was one of the few prisoners who understood Russian and Pechersky didn 't speak either Yiddish or Polish . Pechersky was invited to talk with a group of Jewish prisoner leaders from Poland , to whom he spoke about the Red Army victory in the Battle of Stalingrad and partisan victories . When one of the prisoners asked him why the partisans won 't rescue them from Sobibor , Pechersky reportedly replied : " What for ? To free us all ? The partisans have their hands full already . Nobody will do our job for us . "

The Jewish prisoners who had worked at the Bełżec extermination camp were sent to Sobibor to be exterminated when Bełżec closed . From a note found among the clothing of the murdered , the Sobibor prisoners learned that those who had been killed were from work groups in the Belzec camp . The note said : " We worked for a year in Belzec . I don 't know where they 're taking us now . They say to Germany . In the freight cars there are dining tables . We received bread for three days , and tins and liquor . If all this is a lie , then know that death awaits you too . Don 't trust the Germans . Avenge our blood ! "

The leadership of the Polish Jews was aware that Belzec and Treblinka had been closed , dismantled and all remaining prisoners had been sent to the gas @-@ chambers and they suspected that Sobibor would be next . There was a great urgency in coming up with a good escape plan , and Pechersky , with his army experience , was their best hope . The escape had to also coincide with the time when the Sobibor 's deputy commandant Gustav Wagner went on vacation , since the prisoners felt that he was sharp enough to uncover the escape plan .

= = = Luka = = =

Pechersky clandestinely met with Feldhendler under the guise of meeting Luka , a woman he was supposedly involved with . Luka is often described as an 18 @-@ year @-@ old woman from " Holland " , but records indicate she was 28 and from Germany , her real name was Gertrud Poppert ? Schönborn . After the war , Pechersky insisted that the relationship was platonic . Her fate after the escape was never established and she was never seen alive again . During an interview with Thomas Blatt , Pechersky said the following regarding Luka : " Although I knew her only about two weeks , I will never forget her . I informed her minutes before the escape of the plan . She has given me a shirt . She said , ' it 's a good luck shirt , put it on right now ' , and I did . It 's now in the museum . I lost her in the turmoil of the revolt and never saw her again . "

Luka 's shirt still exists and is described on 000000002010 @-@ 05 @-@ 03 @-@ 0000May 3 , 2010 by Pechersky 's daughter as :

It is very well preserved . Light gray . Has dark @-@ gray stripes . A little worn from wear and being often washed . Long sleeves . The shirt collar has some blurred letters of the Latin alphabet which are no longer readable .

= = = The uprising = = =

According to Pechersky 's plan , the prisoners would assassinate the German SS staff , thereby rendering the auxiliary guards leaderless , obtain weapons , and eliminate the remaining guards . Individual Polish Jewish inmates were assigned specific German SS guards that they were supposed to lure inside the workshops under some pretext and silently kill . Ester Raab , a survivor of the escape , recalled : " The plan was , at 4 o ' clock (pm) , should start (the escape) , everybody has to kill his SS man , and his guard at his place of work . " Only a small circle of trusted Polish Jewish inmates were aware of the escape plan as they didn 't trust the Jews from other European countries .

On 14 October 1943 , Pechersky 's escape plan began . During the day , several German SS men were lured to workshops on a variety of pretexts , such as being fitted for new boots or expensive clothes . The SS men were then stabbed to death with carpenters ' axes , awls , and chisels discreetly recovered from property left by gassed Jews ; with other tradesmen 's sharp tools ; or with crude knives and axes made in the camp 's machine shop . The blood was covered up with sawdust

on the floor . The escapees were armed with a number of hand grenades , a rifle , a submachine gun and several pistols that the prisoners stole from the German living quarters , as well as the sidearms captured from the dead SS men . Earlier in the day , SS @-@ Oberscharführer Erich Bauer , at the top of the death list created by Pechersky , unexpectedly drove out to Che?m for supplies . The uprising was almost postponed since the prisoners believed that Bauer 's death was necessary for the success of the escape . Bauer came back early from Che?m , discovered that SS @-@ Scharführer Rudolf Beckmann had been assassinated , and began shooting at the Jewish prisoners . The sound of the gunfire prompted Alexander Pechersky to begin the revolt earlier than planned . Pechersky screamed the preplanned code @-@ words : " Hurrah , the revolt has begun ! "

Disorganized groups of prisoners ran in every direction . Ada Lichtman , a survivor of the escape recalls : " Suddenly we heard shots ... Mines started to explode . Riot and confusion prevailed , everything was thundering around . The doors of the workshop were opened , and everyone rushed through ... We ran out of the workshop . All around were the bodies of the dead and wounded . " Pechersky was able to successfully escape into the woods . At the end of the uprising , 11 German SS personnel and an unknown number of Ukrainian guards were killed . Out of approximately 550 Jewish prisoners at the Sobibor death camp , 130 chose not to participate in the uprising and remained in the camp ; about 80 were killed during the escape either by machine gun fire from watchtowers , or while getting through a mine field in the camp 's outer perimeter ; 170 more were recaptured by the Nazis during large @-@ scale searches . All who remained in the camp or caught after the escape were executed . 53 Sobibor escapees survived the war . Within days after the uprising , the SS chief Heinrich Himmler ordered the camp closed , dismantled and planted with trees .

= = = Aftermath = = =

Immediately after the escape , in the forest , a group of 50 prisoners followed Pechersky . After some time , Pechersky informed the Polish Jews that he along with a few Soviet Jewish soldiers would enter the nearby village and then shortly return with food . They allegedly collected all the money (Pechersky implies the money collection is a fabricated detail) and weapons except one rifle , but never came back . In 1980 , Thomas Blatt asked Pechersky why he abandoned the other survivors . Pechersky answered :

My job was done . You were Polish Jews in your own terrain . I belonged in the Soviet Union and still considered myself a soldier . In my opinion , the chances for survival were better in smaller units . To tell the people straight forward : " we must part " would not have worked . You have seen , they followed every step of mine , we all would perish . [...] what can I say ? You were there . We were only people . The basic instincts came into play . It was still a fight for survival . This is the first time I hear about money collection . It was a turmoil , it was difficult to control everything . I admit , I have seen the imbalance in the distribution of the weaponry , but you must understand , they would rather die than to give up their arms . ? Pechersky

Pechersky , along with two other escapees , wandered the forests until they ran into Yakov Biskowitz , and another Sobibor escapee . Biskowitz testified at the Eichmann Trial regarding the meeting :

The two of us wandered through the forests , until we met Sasha Pechersky . There were three of them whom I came across . One had weak legs . They wore white clothes made of hand @-@ woven material . They had sunk into mud after escaping . After that , we met together . There were now five of us ? we walked to the Skrodnitze forests . There we met the first Jewish partisans called Yehiel 's Group (under Yehiel Grynszpan) ? it was a group of Jews who had undertaken action . We engaged in sabotaging railway lines , cutting telephone wires , hit @-@ and @-@ run attacks on German army units . ? Yakov Biskowitz

The two Russian Jewish soldiers who Yahov Biskowitz met with Pechersky were Alexander Shubayev (who was responsible for executing SS @-@ Untersturmführer Johann Niemann ; was later killed fighting the Germans) and Arkady Moishejwicz Wajspapier (who was responsible for

executing SS @-@ Oberscharführer Siegfried Graetschus and Volksdeutscher Ivan Klatt ; survived the war) . For over a year Pechersky fought with the Yehiel 's Group partisans as a demolition expert and later with the Soviet group of Voroshilov Partisans , until the Red Army drove out the Germans from Belarus .

As an escaped POW , Pechersky was conscripted into a special penal battalions , conforming to Stalin 's Order No. 270 and was sent to the front to fight German forces in some of the toughest engagements of the war . Pechersky 's battalion commander , Major Andreev , was so shocked by his description of Sobibor that he permitted Pechersky to go to Moscow and speak to the Commission of Inquiry of the Crimes of Fascist @-@ German Aggressors and their Accomplices . The Commission listened to Pechersky and published the report Uprising in Sobibor based on his testimony . This report was included in the Black Book , one of the first comprehensive compilations about the Holocaust , written by Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg .

For fighting the Germans as part of the penal battalions , Pechersky was promoted to the rank of captain and received a medal for bravery . He was eventually discharged after a serious foot injury . In a hospital in Moscow , he was introduced to his future wife , Olga Kotova .

= = After the war = =

After the end of World War II , Pechersky returned to Rostov @-@ on @-@ Don , where he lived before the war , and started working as administrator in an Operetta theater . The mass murder of Jews at the Sobibor death camp became part of the charges against leading Nazis at the Nuremberg Trials . The International Tribunal at Nuremberg wanted to call Pechersky as a witness , but the Soviet government wouldn 't allow him to travel to Germany to testify .

In 1948 , during Stalin 's persecution of Jews , known as the ' Rootless cosmopolitan ' campaign targeting those who allegedly lacked true loyalty and commitment to Stalinism and the Soviet Union , Pechersky was arrested along with his brother . Only after Stalin 's death in 1953 and mounting international pressure for his release , was Pechersky freed from prison . His brother , however , succumbed to a diabetic coma while incarcerated . Alexander Pechersky was permitted to resume working at a small amateur musical theater but in a far more menial position .

The Soviet government prevented Pechersky from testifying at the Eichmann Trial in Israel , only allowing a short deposition in Moscow which was controlled by the KGB . In 1963 , he appeared as a witness during the Soviet trial of 11 former Ukrainian guards at Sobibor ; all of whom were convicted and 10 of whom were executed . According to his daughter in an interview , Pechersky was prevented by the Soviet Union government from testifying in multiple international trials related to Sobibor . The final time Pechersky was refused permission to leave the country and testify was in 1987 for a trial in Poland , and according to his daughter , this refusal " just crippled my father . He almost stopped getting out of bed and instantly aged . "

Alexander Pechersky died on January 19 , 1990 , and was buried at the northern cemetery in Rostov @-@ on @-@ Don , Russia . As of 2009 , Pechersky 's daughter , granddaughter and two great @-@ grandsons live in Rostov @-@ on @-@ Don (his niece , her son and their descendants live in the United States) .

= = Remembrance = =

Alexander Pechersky features prominently in a Dutch @-@ Soviet documentary Revolt in Sobibor (1989) by director Pavel Kogan .

An award @-@ winning documentary about the escape was made by Claude Lanzmann , entitled Sobibor , 14 Octobre 1943 , 16 heures . The revolt was also dramatized in the 1987 British TV movie Escape from Sobibor , in which Rutger Hauer received a Golden Globe Award for Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Television) for his portrayal of " Sasha " . Pechersky however did not attend the premiere of the movie ; his widow later stated that the Soviet government denied him permission to travel to the United States .

Only in 2007 , 17 years after his death , was a small memorial plaque placed on the side of the

building where he lived in Rostov @-@ on @-@ Don . There is also a memorial wall with his name engraved on it in Boston . A street was named in his honor in Safed , Israel , and a stone memorial erected in Tel Aviv more recently .

In January 2016 , he was posthumously awarded the Russian Order of Courage by decree of Vladimir Putin .