**LARO, Aaron**
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## ***Abstract***

Aaron Laro was born March 23, 1919 in Zdzieciol, Poland. He says it always had anti-Semitism. In 1937, signs were posted demanding a boycott of Jewish-owned shops. After war broke out, Jewish property was confiscated, including the Laro's six-room house. Aaron and others hid weapons in the woods.

A ghetto was built in January 1942 in Novogrudek (Navahrudak, Belarus), and Jews had to move there and wear the yellow Star of David. He says there were two massacres, but speaks of only one, in April 1942, when 800 people were killed.

He escaped from the ghetto and joined partisans in the woods. He was a machinist, and repaired tanks and other vehicles they found. They also found Jewish families hiding in the woods.

Russians split the Jews from the partisans. Anti-Semitism was strong in the woods. But a Russian major threatened to kill all partisans if any one of them killed a Jew.

Aaron made a detonator that derailed a train going to Vilna. Then, he helped derail three more trains.

The Russian army liberated them in 1944, and without letting them wash or rest, incorporated them into their troops. Aaron fought in many battles, and still has a bullet near his heart, a piece of shrapnel in his head, and a leg injury.

After a month in a hospital where he recuperated from the bullet wound near his heart, he was made a sergeant. He deserted from the Russian army in autumn 1944. He emigrated to the United States in June 1947, with the woman who had been with him throughout their time in the woods. They married in the U.S.

Aaron said that as a Jew, he "didn't regret for one minute" the blood he spilled fighting against Nazi Germany "because I took revenge for my family and for the six million Jewish people."

## ***Interview***

My name is Aaron Laro. I was born March 23, 1919. Zdzieciol, Poland.

Can you tell me a little about your childhood? And also where you grew up, a little bit about your town, a little bit about your childhood and also about your parents, what your father did, you know, what your mother did …

I was born in a small town in about -- actually by the end -- before the war we were about 4,000 Jewish people.

You remember anything that stands out in your childhood when you were growing up?

No.

No? Okay, that's all right. Did you have brothers and sisters?

I had one brother and two sisters…

Don't mind me when I'm writing, you can just keep talking, don't worry about it. Can you tell me a little bit about your parents, what your father did for a living, and that kind of thing?

My father did two things, he was a shoe maker and then had a shoe store partnership.

Who was he a partner with, do you remember?

Well, one moved to Israel. His partner was Altavanietsky and Elovitch(?) (27).

Do you remember, like, the street that you lived on? Do you remember much about the area you lived in before the war?

I remember, what…

Anything distinctive that you remember about it, you know? What the houses may have looked like?

Well, we had in 1935 a fire, which a tenth of the town burned down. And after that came up a beautiful town; they made beautiful streets with sidewalks and nice homes made out of wood, and gold metal roofs, gold metal roofs mostly, and was nice painted, and government forced people to make picket fences and paint them white yes, was very clean, very clean. Was a big change in 1935. My father built a big six room house, beautiful house -- but it didn't last long. In 1939 the war broke out, actually broke out in '41, and we lived only six years in the new house. Everything was taken away. Now gentiles are living over there, we had to just run away.

Do you remember when you were growing up? Oh, first let me ask you where did you go to school? Did you go to a public school or a private school or a…

It was a private Jewish school.

A private Jewish school.

What was the school like?

What do you mean what was it like?

What did you study there? What did you do?

Well, Polish was what you say in English, compulsory, you had to. So we had every day one hour of Polish and Polish history, Jewish and Hebrew, we had a gym, we had a teacher for sport, gymnastic.

Did you play any sports?

Yeah, we used to have performances twice a year on Hanukkah and on Purim.

Do you remember any instances of anti-Semitism when you were growing up?

It was always anti-Semitic over there, in Poland and in Russia, everybody knows it.

Do you remember any, you know, instances that stand out in your mind that were that, you know, specifically remember that really you can recall?

About anti-Semitism? Well, in 1937 when Hitler start spreading all over, they put up signs on the walls on the Polish church that the gentiles should boycott Jewish people, not shop from Jewish people. That's the most outstanding moment. Otherwise was tolerable, you know what I mean? Jewish people go ahead traveling the villages, buying from the farmers their product. I could hear sometimes a slur, or something else, but when my father was young they had pogroms. In Russian times, it was much worse. Poland was a democracy but the Pas Outsky [ph] was a general, and he had them under control, you know what I mean? It was half democracy and ruled by a general so…and he was not a little bit sympathetic to Jewish people. But then the anti-Semitism was spreading all over Poland. Hitler penetrated Poland in the '30s and it was getting worse and worse.

Were people in your town afraid of the Nazis? I mean, did you know what was going on in Germany at this time?

Well, obviously every German knew. Somebody going tell you they didn't notice is baloney. Only if they couldn't read and didn't know what was going on in the world.

Did people leave? Were they that frightened that they would leave Poland?

No.

They weren't that frightened? They just—

No.

But they knew what—you know, most people knew what was going on?

Wait one second, you see the Jewish people in western Poland, when they were occupied by Nazi Germany, they were escaping to Russia, in our territory.

Going the other way?

That's why every town where we lived we had a lot of displaced persons, what you call them, runaways?

Refugees?

Refugees, we had a lot of refugees.

Who were coming—?

But we had nowhere to run.

Yeah.

We were ready. I remember that too. We got our bicycles, we took our belongings. When the war broke out, we figured we were going to run to Russia, but the Germany army was moving so fast—

It caught up to you.

It caught up to kill, they bombarded on the highways and a lot of our people came back, they came back.

Mmhmm.

But a couple days later it was 1939.

Yeah.

The Russian army came over and we were liberated and under the Russians we didn't show anti-Semitism. Jewish people got better jobs. You know what I mean?

Yeah, sure.

Jewish people got better jobs and, while we were partisans, we had anti-Semitism again. And an aunt was raped and killed.

And that's on the Russians side?

Yeah, partisans, we were together in the woods.

Right.

They disarmed Jewish partisans for any little thing. If a gentile took boots from a farmer, it was nothing, but if a Jew took a pair of boots, they killed him.

Right.

Yeah.

Can you tell me, you were just talking about collecting you know, bicycles getting ready to run to the Russian side. Can you tell me about that period where, the Germans are coming and you

know they're invading and you're running away. Can you tell me about that, like what kind of preparations you made to run to the Russian side, what you took?

I took about… We went through that strategy twice, in 1939 but it lasted two days because soon we hear on the radio that the Russian army cross the border and are coming to liberate us, we weren't scared anymore, because the Germans were still 150 kilometers from us. And we knew that they divided Poland (#102) in half, so we were jumping in the skies, we are so glad. The Russians are coming. We didn't know at that time they were anti-Semites, too.

Right.

But everybody thought communism is the _____ coming for Jewish people.

Did your whole family try to go?

No, no.

Run away or…

No, no, you have small kids it's very hard. But the worst problem was in 1941 when the war started with Russia, so people ran away and the Russian army cut them off, the German army, and they come back, and we were stuck in ghettos.

Right, Okay. Why don't you tell me a little about when you start to run away and then the Russians come in and you first see the Russians the first time in 1939.

I'll give an example. I was already 19 years old. I wasn't so emotional, but my younger brother, I remember he was kissing the Russian tanks. Yeah, people were climbing on the tanks and kissing them, because it was difference between life and death.

Sure. How far did you run before you knew that the—just, you said something about two days, but how far did you get away from your town before… Not far, not far because right away we could hear on the radios, the Russian army's coming.

Okay, can you tell me, when the Russians come in and take over that area of Poland, what was it like? I mean, what did they do? Did they, you said there was some anti-Semitism, did they enact laws against the Jews?

No, no, no. In 1939, when they came in it was very good. Everybody suffered later on. You know what I mean? Communism meant nothing. They cleaned out, as a matter of fact, they cleaned out all our stores. They bought, they had money, but that's it.

Yeah.

But we didn't suffer from anti-Semitism in 1939-40 until the Nazis came in. We suffered from them in the partisans (?), from the Russians…

Okay. What was the Russian—what was the rule like? How was—did your lives change very much because the Russians were there? Did they impose any of their, you know ...

The lives changed completely after two month we realize, it is a _____ (#130) at us and we they nothing but, the only thing they have is propaganda.

Mmhmm.

There was no food, no clothing. You couldn't travel by train, you needed a permit to go from one town to another town. You were just a prisoner.

Okay, and this lasted, you said, the Russians come in late September of '39.

Yes.

And they were there until 1941?

Until June 22, when the war broke out, 1941.

Okay. Did they seize any of the businesses and try to nationalize them?

Oh, the Russians? Sure. They took over everything. They controlled every part of your life. Your heart and your soul. Your body.

We had a six room house, for family of six it's not too much. They wanted to nationalize the house. Take away the house, not take it away but we would have to pay like taxes on the house because the square feet, it was too big for a family of six. My father bribed the head from the finance department and my daughter—my younger sister got a job in that office, so we invited him for dinner.

Yeah.

And it cut the meters, he said a 120 square meters and he made it 110, and the house was still ours. That was life in Russia.

Okay, why don't you tell me a little about when the Germans come back in, in 1941.

Well, when the Germans came back in 1941, we knew it was the beginning of our end. We knew it.

Did you, were people in that area did they know, I don't know, most of the camps and things hadn't been set up. Did they know of concentration camps in Germany and, you know that kind of thing about places like Auschwitz and… Do you remember if you knew?

I am not sure. We knew they were taking away a lot of Jewish people. We knew it.

But you weren't sure where they were going?

We didn't know that much by that time. But one man, the mayor in our town from Lodz, a big city in Poland, he was lucky he escaped and he came back because he married, his wife was from our town Zdzienceil and he came back and he told us, assembled a lot of Jewish people and told them to dig a big grave with spoons…

With spoons?

With spoons, and he came and he told us it's tragic, he says it's our end.

Did people not believe him, when he told those things?

Ah yes, ah yeah, ah yeah, but there was nowhere to run?

Yeah.

You see the population, all the population was against us.

Mmhmm.

So, at the moment, you didn't have where to go. If the population is with you, then it's okay. But when the population is against you, the moment that you [the Jew?] walked out from the ghetto, they were pointing to the Germans, Jude. A Jew. You could recognize a Jew, always.

Sure. It's interesting you say that, because I've had interviews where people say, "They didn't fear the Germans so much as they feared, especially in Poland, their neighbors." Because the Germans seemed, according to these people who I've talked to, seemed not to really know who was Jewish. But the Poles could point them out. You know, who knew exactly who was Jewish so there was, so they didn't really fear the Germans as much as they feared…their neighbors.

They didn't fear—the soldiers weren't so bad. You remember the soldiers were standing near your house, stopped to rest for a while, and one young German came over and was talking to them a little. He said, "Now it's not going to be bad for you. When the S.S. are going to come," he warned, "then it's going to start a lot of trouble for you." But he was looking with a little sympathy, you could… right?

Wife: Yeah. Excuse me, can I talk?

Interviewer: Sure, go ahead.

Wife: We had to wear yellow marks…

Aaron Laro: Star of David now?

Wife: Because we are Jews and we are not allowed to walk on the sidewalk.

Interviewer: Now this is after the Germans…?

Aaron Laro: That's in the ghetto, that started in the ghetto, yeah.

Interviewer: When the Germans (were in)?

Wife: There was one German, where she was working cleaning then, he once said to her and a friend, "maybe you should run away in the woods, but how will you survive the winter?"

[Cannot understand her words here - #184]

Aaron Laro: No, no, no, he was short. I remember him, yeah. Short-headed guy ...

Wife: Said, “I don’t know why Hitler doesn’t like the Jewish people.”

Interviewer: He said this?

Aaron Laro: Yeah!

Wife: Turned back to me and that they stink in Germany.

Aaron Laro: He said, “In Russia, in White Russia, Polacks they stink,” he says. “You are intelligent people, what does he want from you?

Wife: “They stink they’re stupid, they stink.”

Interviewer: Yeah.

Wife: That’s what he said to me. He cared for the Jewish people. He was a nice guy.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Wife: A policeman, a gendarme. He’s a policeman.

Interviewer: Right.

Aaron Laro: So I was working over there—I was starting to learn for a machinist, an electrician in a power station. So when the Germans came in, the power station was supposed to run. Then they gave me a permit, I was walking during the night by myself and I used to turn off the lights, we had lights until one o’clock, I think. And the Germans used to come across me, but they were patrolling the town. I used to see, with _____ (181). He never touched me. _____ (194) and I used to go through the gates, back to the ghetto—he never touched me.

It was interesting. Why don’t you tell me a little bit about when the Germans first get there and what you did and what your family did when the Germans come through in 41? Before we get to the ghetto. We can talk about the ghetto later.

Well, when they came in they were bombarding, so we run away in the outskirts of the town where my father’s friends, White Russians, we go over there for two days.

Interviewer: What did you take with you when you ran?

Nothing. We were in the same town, I took my bicycle. A lot of people even didn’t run from the town. People were resigned. We knew there was nowhere to go. And then we came back. We were lucky we were still in our homes from July until January 1942, then they made the ghetto for us. I don’t know why we were so lucky. Some other towns they made ghettos right away, and we were living, going on with a normal life. The only thing, we couldn’t walk on the sidewalks and the Star of David we had to wear.

So they made you wear the Star of David after they came in. Was it immediately or did they make you wear an arm band as soon as they came in?

I think it was maybe a month after, as soon as they came in. I don’t remember exactly or two weeks.

Why don't you tell me a little bit about the ghetto?

The ghetto in order to go into the ghetto they gave us from eight in the morning till two in the afternoon. We had no machine, nothing, no trucks, no horses. So how much would you take on the sled? It was winter time. So we moved in our aunt's house, she had only three rooms. We were sharing two families in, so whatever we could—furniture, forget about. So we took clothing and I don't remember, I think no furniture even, there was nowhere to put it.

Was it just a matter of space, or did the Germans not allow you to take certain things?

I don't think they didn't allow, but they gave us six hours, from eight until two, so how much furniture could you take, there was nowhere to put it, because my Aunt had a little apartment.

Did you take food with you as well?

Whatever we had, we took with us. Sure.

Was the ghetto fenced, closed?

Fenced.

What was the fence? Was it stone or picket?

Picket. It wasn't, look how many people escaped. You could jump over, it was a picket that high, that's all. But the local police were patrolling around it.

Were you allowed—you weren't allowed to leave, legally. You were supposed to, you had some sort of pass to leave? Was that how it was?

Yeah. They took Jewish people on the highways. They took Jewish people to cut trees in the woods so they used to take them out in groups. They used to take them out and uh, the Judenrat used to supply them. They needed, let's say, 100 people to go to the woods, they needed 100 people, so they counted 100 people and they took them, used to march like soldiers to the highways and to the woods.

Now, were these people guarded by Germans or were they guarded by, like, Polish police?

Police. One German, the rest police.

How large was the ghetto itself? A few blocks?

The ghetto, one, two, three, four, five. I would say a kilometer and half long and not too wide—ten square blocks. Ten, eight square blocks.

Did you go out on some of these work details?

Did I what?

Did you go out on some of these work details? You were talking about when they took people out to the woods or to fix the highways, did you do any of that? Any of that work?

No. I was working at the power station.

You were working at the power station.

Yes.

What did you do at the power station? What was your job?

My job was to take care of the machines. I was 18 years old and I could take apart the big machines.

So, did you do that—is that something you'd worked on before the war?

I started in Poland to learn that trade. Yeah.

Wife: When he came here, he couldn't get a job.

When he came here, to the United States?

Yeah. Because it was a closed union. It was a non-gentile [?] union, an electrical union, I couldn't get in. The United Jewish Appeal gentleman told me, "Lie if you want, but forget about electrician." When a father dies, the son comes in in his place, they are so strict.

Why don't you tell me about -- you said that many people were able to escape. Did you notice people leaving, did you know people who left before you left?

No, not many people. We used to sneak out and take weapons in the woods.

Oh, really. Why don't you tell me something about that?

Well, we used to realize that we don't need so much clothing so we used to exchange with gentiles, give him a suit and get from him a rifle, bullets, grenades, revolver, whatever we could.

And did you hide these things, you hid these things in the woods?

We had it in the ghetto, in the basement in a dry place and we used to—we were in touch with a Russian lieutenant and he was working in a village near the forest, so he had cabin that he made in the woods, so we used to bring it in over there.

Was there somebody who was kind of running this operation? I don't want to call it an operation because I don't know exactly… Was there somebody, like, in charge of gathering the weapons and everything?

I know what you're pointing at. Our president of the Judenrat (279) was a lawyer—Alta Boretsky (?). Why did we pick him? Because he was a smart man and he was the president of the Judenrat. So we picked some of the Jewish militia in the ghetto in that organization so we could know better what was going on around, because they were patrolling the ghetto. They would not betray us. Like in some other ghettos a lot of Jewish people were betrayed. Not in our town. We were a different breed. And because of him, while he was in the Judenrat and he had a lot of money because the Germans were asking for money, for gold, for fur. So through him, we could get some money and buy weapons to arm the Jewish people. He was a smart man. So he was actually our leader.

How many people, that you know of, were involved in trying to procure these weapons?

Well, we were few groups. I don't know exactly what was going on in the other group, but I know they had workers, too. They had rifles bought, but we were about eight guys.

Can you describe for me, like, from start to finish, what you would do in order to try to get these weapons? Like the eight of you, what the organization was like, where you got the money, you said you got some money from this lawyer, he would collect some money or whatever.

Yeah, but we used to exchange, give him clothing, shoes, whatever we could, a sewing machine. You know what I mean? Who needs a sewing machine?

Sure, right!

So we give the family (?), for them a sewing machine was like a million dollars.

You had to sneak out in order to do this?

Yeah.

Did you do this at night, or mostly in the day?

I have to put one thing. The White Russian population was different, a quieter people than the Polacks. That's why some Polish people told you they feared the Polacks, the local population more than the Germans. Our people, the White Russians were—it's a quieter element but they didn't, you know what I mean, they didn't point their fist or a finger on a Jews and the Polacks. That's why we could operate easier. You know cigarette holder, chromium was in Europe? If you kept it like that, you took it out from pocket, it is shiny and you could get from the farmer whatever you want, bread and butter, everything, they were shaking.

Yeah.

Boichikes, don't kill me, don't kill me, I'll give what you want.

Okay. You said something about getting rifles and things, and guns and pistols. Were you able to get anything else, like grenades?

Yeah.

Where did you get the grenades from?

See, when the Germans destroyed the Russian army, they dropped everything on the fields.

The Russians did?

Yeah. The major population, they picked from the field whatever they wanted.

They had grenades?

They had plenty.

Oh, I see. Okay.

Some of them were communists, leftist sympathizers. They gave us for free, just to help us. You know what I mean? Some wanted money.

Why don't you tell me a little bit about how you got involved with the partisans?

How?

Did you get involved with the partisans while you were in the ghetto or after?

I'm telling you when I was in the ghetto there was still no partisans. We met a Russian, I mentioned before, we met a Russian in our town, he brought logs, wood to sell and we got acquainted with him, and he was a lieutenant, and that's when it started.

I remember the first meeting we had a friend of mine and he was afraid too. It was a short meeting and he told us we should start to get weapons. And that when we started to buy weapons and we used to bring it over (?) about six kilometers from our town.

In the woods?

In the woods.

Do you remember the date, roughly, about when that was when you had that first meeting?

Yeah. It was cool, we were buying a lot of wood for the winter. It must be in October, October.

In 1942 or?

1941. We still didn't have a ghetto.

Oh, so this meeting took place before the ghetto.

Before the ghetto. The ghetto started January 1942. Thank God, I still remember dates. You know a lot of town people still call me, when was the shooting, when was the massacre? And when did they take us in that ghetto? They are younger than me and they don't remember any dates.

You remember them all?

I remember them.

You got a good memory.

I'm bad to remember names. It's funny thing, how a brain works. I'm not so good in memorizing names.

But you know numbers?

Dates.

You said there were about eight people who were involved in getting these weapons. They were all involved with this Partisan person? The person you had the meeting with. Did they all know him?

I don't believe they all know him. I don't remember exactly how many of us were at the meeting first—three or four. But then we took in more boys, we needed more. We were not afraid because there were no informers, like in Hebrew we call it "Amussian" (?). We were neighbors, we knew him.

How many Germans, like either S.S. or German army persons were in the town at this time? Do you remember?

(344) Not many, there were about eight, nine Germans and the rest were local militia, black uniforms.

Was there a larger German contingent somewhere in the area, not far away?

In Novogrudek (Navahrudak, Belarus). Yeah, Minkat (? Nothing found) was over there...? (379).

Why don't you describe for me a little bit about more go on with what you were doing in the ghetto collecting these weapons, and then when I guess, when you escaped, or they took you to Novogrudek (Navahrudak, Belarus).

You want the whole story?

Sure, give it to me, give me the whole story.

We got in touch with another Russian guy, a Russian pilot who was working for somebody in our town.

About what time was this now, was this about the same time we were talking about before?

We were about 1942, we were in the ghetto already. That was our biggest mistake. Even that lawyer, and he said we should stay in touch with him because I saw him once with a gun in the pocket. And then I became suspicious. I said how can you walk around with a gun in the pocket? In other words, he had a permit? Voretsky didn't realize it, that lawyer. He betrayed us.

The lawyer did?

No, no, the Russian pilot.

The Russian pilot. O.K.

He betrayed us.

He betrayed you to whom? Who did he tell? The Germans?

See what can happen. We had a meeting in front of, we weren't married by that time, we were young kids, we went to school together and we were friends. We are standing in front of her house in the ghetto and the slaughterhouse, you had to go through the ghetto, the gentiles, in order to reach the slaughter house. So he was working for one who was making the provisions, you know, non-kosher. Walking back he stopped and said that he had in the village, promising somebody two revolvers and grenades, and I would like one of you should go with me. And not the whole group was standing. It was me, and Sholom Pyolin (Sholom Pyolun and Ohat Zukotun?), three or four of us. Until now I can't understand why did he pick that Sholom Pyolun

(?). He was a refugee from Poland and he moved in our town. He ran away from the Nazis. A small boy. He picked him because he was not from our town and he said to him, Sholom [Russian words You will go with me] (?) (420). It means, you'll go with me. And we all going to meet over there in _____ and I'll wait for you. He was a brave guy, my friend, Sholom Pyolun. It was warm, it was summer. It was six, seven in the evening, the sun was still shining a little bit. He said goodbye to us and he went straight over the fields in the meadows in that direction. She was working for the Nazis cleaning their building over there and she was going into a little room where she had the brooms and the mop and everything. She opened up the door she sees that Russian guy jump out of the window because he saw her. The guy who betrayed us. So she realized right away that he is a spy. But she couldn't stop the work to tell us. They would kill her, the Nazis.

That's right.

The moment she finished her work and she came back home, she call me, "Aaron, I saw Vanya over there." His name was Vanya. Oye, I said we are in trouble. We couldn't call him back because he was gone, and he was waiting, the Germans made an ambush and they caught him alive, and they brought him in our town. See the story? A tragedy.

What did they do after that? What did the Germans do after that?

They tortured him to death in prison.

Oh my gosh. Now this is your friend, this is not the Russian guy they tortured?

No, no. What happened to the Russian guy from then on, we don't know, he disappeared.

But the guy who went across the field, your friend, was the one who was tortured.

Yes.

Do you know where they took him?

He went to many places and I think they got the guns and the grenades, but on the way back they caught him with the grenades, they had proof, you know what I mean, with the grenades and everything. So he was arrested, like I told you, they tortured him to death, but he didn't give any names. He didn't give any names of us. A Jewish guy was going to get water from the well and he found that little note, he threw out the little window.

From where he was being tortured?

From the prison, yeah.

Wow. So the Germans basically, they knew that there was some sort of plan going on, but they didn't know who it was?

They knew, yes. It was in the evening, a friend of mine in the same group, comes over my house and he says, "Aaron, we have to run away because they uncovered the underground organization. And, come on, that lawyer and the rest of the boys were waiting in the main Schule in—the ladies." You know, in Europe, the ladies were services having on the top separate, not the men

together, it was an orthodox Shul. "Over there they're a hiding, and make it fast, we have to retreat, we have to go." And then I had a tragic moment. My mother and father came over—"you are leaving us in a tragic moment like now? You run away to save your life and you leave us alone?" I say, "Mommy, I am not trying to save my life, we are going to die anyway. I want to fight, I want to die in battle, I want to take a couple of Germans with me in the grave, but I don't want to go alive in the grave." It didn't help. And there was another reason that I couldn't go. If I would go away, I wouldn't report to work the next day so the Germans would kill my parents anyway. They would know right away that I disappeared. So I said to my friend, "I am not going. I don't want that on my conscience, they should kill my parents, my sister and brothers." They said goodbye to me. They went away, they ran away that night from the ghetto. They came in the woods, they met, there was a small group of Russian partisans, but he was intelligent so he became the commander. A couple weeks later, I ran away too, for a couple of nights, and I came back and it was quiet, nobody ever looked for me, for my other friend and that Russian guy disappeared. They sent him away somewhere, I don't believe they killed him, the sent him away in another town.

To do something somewhere else.

Yeah. So I'll go in another instance. I was working like nothing would happen, but over there one Sunday the Russian partisan went to the village, they had a good time with the girls. They were drinking, became high, intoxicated and they opened up a fire and started yelling, "Kill the Jew and save Russia." An old slogan _____ (501). They killed that Boretskafy (?) (502), that lawyer, they killed two, three, four and the rest escaped.

This was in the ghetto? They killed people in the ghetto? Is that where they killed them?

No. In the partisans (?). They killed my friend, that lawyer, and the other boys that joined him.

Oh, the other—oh, I see. I understand now, Okay.

They were anti-Semites, you know what I mean?

Why don't you go ahead and tell me some more. So, now you're still in the ghetto, you didn't escape. You decided not to escape because you did not want to endanger your family. What did you do after that?

I was still working power station.

How long did you work there?

I worked there until the massacre. Until they killed all the Jewish people.

Which was when?

August the 6th of 1942.

Why don't you explain that, tell me about that.

About what?

About August 6th.

It was four o'clock in the morning and we suddenly hear people running. We looked in the window, we're asking them what happened? We are surrounded by the Germans. A lot of Germans all around the town.

So now these were Germans who weren't in the town before? They came…

No, armies, regular army, a lot of them. A lot were Lithuanians, murderers. They came with rolled up sleeves like butchers, and drunk, and they told us to come to the market, the center of the town. They had also another excuse, they wanted to check the "Arbishein" (?) (541).

The workplace or whatever?

Like a document that you are working.

Right, work papers?

Yes. So we came together in the center of the town, and then when they got all of us, they took us—they chased us like cattle near the Jewish cemetery. The second one. We had an old cemetery and that was the newer one. And they brought us near the cemetery and they gave us an order to lay down face down. We were surrendered to Germans. Whoever tried to escape the ghetto, was killed right away. There were three lines of Germans. Three rings. Know what I mean? And then they started call skilled people and they warned us not to lift the head. If they ask for carpenter, raise your hand but keep your nose in the ground. So they called carpenters, blacksmiths, and here and there and I say to myself, I knew from my father that during the war, a shoemaker and a tailor was the best trade. I said to myself, what do they need an electrician, machinist? So when they were calling for shoemakers, I raise my hand. He told me to lift my head. When they have to lift your head, they wanted to see your age. If you are too young, they didn't take you. So then he poked you with the rifle, they hit you in the back. Get up and run over there, face down. And then my father the same way and that's all from my family. So officially they were supposed to live. We found out later on that about 120 people take to Novagrudek to that forced labor camp.

That's where they took them?

Yes, but they took us to the movies. They packed us in the movies and during the next couple of days they found a lot of Jewish people hiding and the movie was filled up. That's when she came out with her family. She was hiding too. So they accumulated instead of 120, there was maybe a thousand. So then when they tried to pick who should live and who should die again. And then when the German pulled her out and saw she is a good tailor, see I'm coming to the point, and the rest they put us in trucks and took us to railway station and then they put us in the train and they took us to a camp. A forced labor camp.

How long, or how far from your town is Novagrudek?

Thirty-five kilometers. Wires and you know, the rings (?).

Barbed wire.

Yeah. Barbed wires and on each corner on towers was they were standing with machine guns.

The people who they didn't choose to take to the work camp, what happened to them?

They took them, they went to the left and they shoot them.

They shot them?

They shot them. They took them back to the same cemetery. There was a big grave, mass grave, that the gentiles are digging. They never told us. I have good friends, Polacks, a kilometer and a half from my town and they never came to tell a Jew, that run away they are digging graves for you. It was so secret that nobody knew anything. And that's in a big pit, a big grave where 2,500 Jewish people may be. We had two massacres. One was in April 1942 and they killed old people and widows.

In April of 1942?

Yes, they killed 800.

They just killed people they couldn't send to a work camp?

The first massacre was just—they called it, they couldn't work, useless people it was for them.

Why don't you tell me a little bit about Nova (_____)

But it wasn't a cattle train? But, also it wasn't a passenger train? It didn't have seats.

I think it was, benches on the side. But they squeezed us in so many people you couldn't sit anyway.

Right.

Like sardines.

That's what I wanted to know, if it was the same as most train rides that I've heard about. O.K., go ahead. I'm sorry I interrupted you. Go ahead and tell me about Novagrudek (?).

So when I was taken they dropped us in the working camp, I said to myself, Oh, my God, how will we escape from here? The first thing was I was looking around, how the fences were made and if there was any chance to escape.

What did you think when you came in and saw that? Did it look like it was promising that maybe you could escape?

No. I became very pessimistic. Very pessimistic because it was a small place and the police were standing with machine guns all around in the towers. I was there a few days and the camp was, before we came over there, there were people there already from the same town, from Novagrudek, the natives were already there.

So the camp was outside of the town of Novagrudek?

It was a still town. It used to be Koht/called (?) (650) Poland, big building. So, they made a carpenter shop, a shoemaker shop and the villagers used to come and bring work, the Jewish

people used to do all that work. I noticed that every day six Jewish people are being picked out without writing down names, you just counted six Jews are going with horse and wagon to ghetto, because there was still a ghetto in Novagrudek. They were baking bread for the forced labor camp. So every day there used to go six people and when they came back the police were counting six Jews. They didn't care Aaron, Jack, no names, just numbers.

As long as they had six?

We realized it, we said to ourselves, from the ghetto would be a good chance to escape, because there's just a picket fence and that's it. So we organized. There was____ was in charge of our people from our town. So we asked him he should pick out six from our guys and send us to the ghetto. There were Jewish people from the ghetto who wanted to come to the forced labor camp because they believed there was a better chance to survive in the forced labor camp. So we went six over there, we sent six people from the ghetto with the horse and wagon with the bread. Next day the other group, my friends, came another six.

So you were shifting people into the ghetto?

So we were 12 already. And another six came in the horse and wagon. And in nighttime, we found over there they gave us a shovel in the ghetto we dug holes, cat and dog (?). Now a policeman was patrolling. But the fence in the ghetto was long, so when he started out on that corner until he comes over there and back, so we dug a hole somewhere here under the bushes and as soon as __ passed us, one by one we would jump out and we escaped all 12 of us.

Now is this ghetto similar to the one in your town? The one in Novagrudek?

It was a higher fence, that was the difference. Wood, anyway. No barbed wire, it was a fence, that's all.

At this point you then went into the woods?

We had a good guy. One guy, one of my friends, he was a carpenter, was working in the villages, that's why he was a good guy. By two o'clock we were far away by a lake. I remember, I was so nervous, the tongue was so dry, stiff, we _____. It took us two weeks to reach the partisans. We knew where to go, we are not afraid even we knew there were anti-Semites and they killed some people, we had no other choice and we were so surprised we came over there, we found a lot of Jewish people. They run out from the hiding places under the floors, under the houses and everybody knew where to go. That's when we join them. By the end of the summer, '42, we were around over a 100 boys from our town. We had more than 200,000 bullets, we had machine guns, we had rifles.

You said it took you two weeks? Was that traveling mostly through the woods to get to the Partisans?

Yes.

How did you get food and things?

From the farmers. One of our friends had a little revolver. For ladies, a little one with two bullets, that's all we had. And I told you we had a cigarette holder so we used to keep it like that

and they were shivering. We were boys, take a bread, cheese, milk. On the way to the woods, we were looking for Jewish people, we knew where Jewish people were hiding. My friend's father was in the village and we found him.

So you just collected these people and took them?

Yes. We took them with us in the woods.

O.K., why don't you describe to me about the organization and the leaders of the partisan group and what you did with the partisans. What you were doing?

Well, the first summer, our main objective was to arm a lot of Jewish people, there was a lot of Jewish people. We were just a Jewish fighting group in the beginning.

In order to do that, what did you do?

Well, we used to buy, we used to go to friends, a lot of Jews had friends in the villages. They are buying from Jewish people in town, you know, customers. Asking for grenades or weapons. The problem was that we were not trained soldiers. I was too young for the Polish army, I was not kosher for the Russian army. They didn't want to take me because my uncle was fighting against the communists in 1920. My father was a big shot in our town, they didn't trust me. We had actually maybe five or ten percent professional soldiers who were in the Polish army. They knew how to keep a rifle. We didn't know anything, we had to learn from a-b-c.

So they trained you?

They trained, you had to learn yourself. For instance, I found, we used to see on the fields standing tanks, burned down tanks, rotting tanks the Germans destroyed them. I used to take out the machine guns and bring them in the woods. They were still good, but the springs used to be nailed from the fire when the tank was burning, so they were soft. It didn't work with the machine gun, so I took the springs and I used to heat it up in the fire flame and wrap it in oil to temper it. Sometimes I succeeded and sometimes not. That's the way we used to make machine guns put together from three to one. You know what I mean?

So basically that's what you did, you were ...?

Because I am a machinist, it was in my field already.

So you collected weapons or whatever you could use.

This is still the summer of 42? What kind of operations did you carry out? Did you, like, try to fight or attack any German places or anything?

From beginning in November 42, we had the first fight. In the center of our forest, there was a village and they sent in Ukrainians and Germans and they made outpost, they call it. They call it a garrison, outpost. And they sent us in a letter we should surrender, get rid of the Jews, the Jewish people, they were writing like to the gentiles. So they got an answer, if you'll hit us with the clean bullets, we'll cure it, but if our rusty bullets are going to hit you, you'll die from infection. Nobody surrendered to them. And there was not, we were not under one command. Every group was for himself. It was no good. Sometimes we were fighting each other too. It

was no good. But we had to destroy the Germans. We got united under one command. And it was one morning, I remember, in November and we had two tanks that the Russian boys fixed them, but the Russian army left them. It had tires like a car, it is made out of steel and a little cannon, you know what I mean?

Like an armored transport?

Yeah.

Something like that?

The top turns like in a tank, a little one. We had two of them and we _____ (736).

Where did you hide those? Did you hide those in the woods also?

In the woods. The woods were about 4 x 4 kilometers—it was pretty big. And we had two big rivers, the Yennen(?) that flows into the Baltic Sea. So we attack in one, a Russian lieutenant officer killed only. We destroyed them, our first fight. We took a lot of trophies. That's the way we could help our Jewish people who lived, a lot of groups lived in the woods. Whole families. Husbands, wives and children who survive. So we gave them one quilt to cover—big beds, the kitchen was cooking for the soldiers, we took away the horse with the kitchen and a lot of bullets, rifles, a lot of trophies. But we did it a couple times more, then we got an order from Moscow not to do it anymore.

To stop?

To stop because one partisan's life is more important than 100 Germans. But what they wanted us to do is hit and run, hit and run. You couldn't keep up a long fight with the Germans. Like I had 50 bullets, how long can you fight? Oh, and by that time came an order to split up the Jewish group. See Stalin, he didn't trust the Jewish group. We couldn't resist. They were in the thousands and we were a few hundred. So they split us up. Part of us between the gentiles.

O.K. when they split you up, where did you go?

In the same forest.

You stayed there?

Yeah, a couple of kilometers there was another group. So the first damage we tried to do the Germans, we burned down all the bridges. The transportation, they would drive the trucks. Telephone lines we used to cut down. Then we started learning the rail trains. That was the most important thing.

How did you do that?

There was a Ukrainian captain and he had a Jewish wife. When anti-Semitism was very high in the woods, a group of Russian, there was a major—what was his name? I still remember him. He had a lot of Jewish people with him from Russia. He was a communist. When he heard what was going on, anti-Semitism, and was killed, and so forth. All the partisans were called in one place and he give an order, if you kill one Jew, will be killed all of you, it's an order. We have to

kill Germans, we came to fight our enemy. It quieted down. So, I'll come to the point. That Ukrainian captain, called me. He said I heard you are a very handy boy, you know electrical work. Would you like to make mines in the rail trains? I said right away, "sure." He said to me, "lay down." It's summer time in the tents. I remember laying on the ground, he took out the piece of paper and a pencil and he made a sketch. What we needed was a detonator and a battery and a big shell—a 125 millimeter shell he gave me. And he said, "Here go make it." I picked three or four Jewish guys, my friend who lives in Houston, Texas, Morris Abrams, he still is over there, and we went to a group over there living in the woods. What I needed was plywood to make a little box. So I made up the box and I made everything with a battery, with a button sticking out just to go under the rail and we went not far away, about 20 kilometers from us was running a train from Lemberg (L'viv, Ukraine) to Vilna. From south Poland up to the north, north Lithuania. And one boy was watching the Germans on one side and one boy was and the other one we toOkay our coats to cover up because I had to turn on a flashlight. You have to see what you are doing, otherwise you would explode and you'll get your _____ (787). And I put in mine, you have to be very careful because you have to put detonator four millimeters under the rail. When the train comes, the weight of the train settles eight millimeters, it sinks. So you had room only four millimeters. The most dangerous thing. So when I made it and then we put in the shell, I remember we dug a big hole. Now you have to keep the dirt, not leave a mark that you dug the dirt because the Germans are walking back and forth. So we left the gravel, everything is put aside. And when I put it in the ground then I put with the chisel I made a little hole in the shell and I put in the detonator and carefully cover up with the dirt and put back the gravel, we covered it up and we run away in the woods. About three kilometers, two kilometers we lay down, we're waiting. Eleven o'clock in the morning, I should live, I still remember 11 in the morning, we hear chug, chug, the train is coming. In our territory it used to go slow, in the beginning it used to go fast, but since we started to derail them, they got smart, the Germans, they go slow because the damage is smaller when you go slow, like 40 miles, but it used to go 80. And suddenly, we heard an explosion. We were so glad, my first successful job. So, in the night we went to the village and the gentiles said, what happened? So they told us it was the train with medication.

Oh, no.

And three cars jumped down, not all of them, three, three cars. So by the same time, the train was destroyed, damaged and it would take a week to fix it, so it slowed down the supplies to the battlefield. That was my first job. The second successful job was we were sent to the Third Reich. You know part of Poland was next to Germany?

Right.

_____ was Germany, over there it was very hard to fight because the population was mostly Polacks. Over there we were walking two days and finally we came over there, we were very lucky we had a very good guide. I still can't understand how come he knew so well our territory. He was a Russian. He was living like Moshe Rabinim (sp.), the Jewish people from Egypt. And I'll make it short, we derailed three trains over there too. Two with shells and one with gasoline. Because two groups went over there before us and never came back they were killed over there. And we were lucky, we came back. We had a local paper in the woods, they were writing about me operating. In the worst circumstances I used to clean my machine gun, I had a machine gun. It wasn't rusty because when we came back, the White Polacks were shooting at us. So my

machine gun was working and I opened fire on them. And I kept my machine gun in good shape.

So it worked when you needed it?

So how long, so, you were with the Partisans until the end of the war?

I was, we were liberated by the Russian army in July 1944.

So July of 44 you, did they make you go in the army, is that what they did? The Red Army. So you were kind of incorporated into the army.

We were incorporated, they didn't ask us.

Did you want to go, did you not want to do that?

Actually, we were bitter with them. I'll tell you why. We were living under abnormal conditions. We had all kind of skin diseases. Sometimes you wear underwear for four, five weeks. We had, excuse me, lice and all the hell. And they didn't let us to go back to the town to a bath to wash ourselves and change the clothing. They took us right away to the battlefield and did not give us a chance to rest two, three days. That was what we were angry at.

O.K. Did you see any action while you were in the Red Army before the end of the war? Did you fight against the Germans?

Did I see action?

Yes. Were you involved in battles?

In the Red Army, the Russian army? Sure. It didn't take long and we were fighting in Bialystok. We knew that the Germans were going to start the next morning and offensive. And they, I went to artillery. When I saw that infantry is just cannon meat, flesh, so they were looking for artilleries, so I raised my hand and I went over there. We were standing battery, four of us, suddenly we hear the German tanks in the morning. And they were moving slowly, slowly and we open up a fire with our cannons. The shells were too small. We used the biggest tanks, tiger and panther. Like one family houses, so big. And that's what they were waiting for. The moment they saw us shooting, they opened up the fire on us. We were four times six, twenty-four, all of them were killed. Me and three Russian boys survived. That was my first battle. And I had shrapnel in my temple, right here.

O.K.

That was my first battle, then we were fighting continuously.

Could you tell us at this point, did you know the Germans, could you tell that they were losing the war? You know what I mean, that the war seemed to be going bad for the Germans at this point, or was that not evident?

I think they knew it. They didn't have any more airplanes, seldom you saw an airplane because they lost a lot of airplanes over England, and we were not afraid of them anymore. But you still had to watch out. They were very good fighters, the Germans. They started a couple contra-

offensives and they wounded a lot of our boys and they killed a lot of our boys. And we had a very heavy fight in Poland, in Solinka. Oh what a fight we had over there. The big river, the river was named Solinko. We crossed the bridge and we had just a platform. Two kilometers deep and maybe five in the width. And the Germans are shooting at us and it was just like an earthquake, like an earthquake. After a nice couple of hours it quieted down. My lieutenant and the guys were hiding in the trenches. And when I searched for the little window in each cannon, when I looked and I saw the Germans running, I became wild. I said, now I have a moment to take revenge. And I'm yelling to the window to bring up shells, they were hanging and we couldn't hear each other. Because from the airplanes and the bombs and everything, it was terrible. So I was carrying myself the shells and shooting them so much that the paint on the cannon was burning, believe me, smoke was coming out. When it was quiet down, two boys, Russian young soldiers, 18 years old, kids, come over to me, I should help them to take out Germans, surrounding the white flag from the trench. I said I have no right to leave my cannon. They said it's your job, infantry, go take them. So I see them standing and talking, so I stood up too because I was on my knees. I could hear many times bullets hitting the spires, it makes a "Whoooo", it's singing. What I see, I thought the Germans were running away. The moment I stood up, knocked me a bullet here, through and through, and I fell like a rock. I was wounded in the hospital and I was taken from the battlefield.

It missed your heart?

That's what the doctor told me. Mendel was following you. Right here it went in my blade and my shoulder.

And you were in the hospital for a month?

A month.

And then they put you right back out?

Yes. Then they sent me to the military school. I was a month in the military school and I came out I was a sergeant and I was a commander of a cannon.

Where was the military school?

Not far from the battlefield.

And then you came back as a sergeant?

Yes. (Wife: He won a lot of medals.)

Do you still have the medals?

It's a long story. I deserted in Russia, in Poland we lost, we were going back to Russian, I deserted so I throw away all my medals, who needs it, because the _____ (911) were looking for me all over the town. I was running from one house to another.

So you've been wounded and you go in the hospital and you're back on the battlefield, about what time was this, when was this? Late '44, early '45, do you remember?

No that was ‘44 it was still warm, it was maybe in September, because end of September, maybe.

Can you tell me a little bit about the end of the war? As the war starts to wind down, did you go, did you remain…?

I will try to make it shorter because you can talk another week if I have to tell you everything. We go to central Poland, northern Berlin, and we came in East Prussia and we split in half and we came out to the Baltic Sea, near Koenigsberg (Kaliningrad, Russia). Heavy fights over there. Germans resisted, we were arrested in four days and then they threw us over into Germany, like I said, north of Berlin and soon Berlin fell, the resistance was very weak already. And slowly we were moving on and moving on and it was dangerous because the German army fell apart. So you could hear Germans talking in the front of you, in the back of you. We were scared, so we couldn’t sleep even. But I was fighting until we came close to the American army. I actually didn’t see because I was in the artillery. I wasn’t on the first line. I’m glad I was privileged to have the opportunity to fight against Nazi Germany. As a Jew, I didn’t regret one minute for the blood I was spilling. Because I took revenge for my family and for the six million Jewish people.

Do you remember the day when the war ended, where you were? What you were doing when you heard the war was over?

I’m telling you, in Germany.

So you were right outside Berlin?

West of Berlin. Yes.

Can you tell me a little bit what you did after the war?

After the war, we were going back to Russia. In Lodz was parade; a general was standing, there was a big parade. While we were marching I look sideways, I see the people are jumping on the sidewalk, waving hands, _____ (951) on I turn my head, and I look, my ex-friend passes, they recognized me, they recognized me waving their hands. What can I do, it is a parade. But there was a lieutenant in charge of us, marching first, he was young. I said to him comrade lieutenant, I want information to get out. He said what happened? I said to him I see my friend over there and they are jumping, he said go, catch up with them and I never saw me again. They told me what goes on in Russia about anti-Semitism. And my wife and my father were still over there. They told me send a telegram and come over. They never got my telegram. I had a lot of the _____ (963) looking for me. I had to wait for them until November. (Wife: Excuse me, we came looking for him, in town, ask for him, actually we don’t know. I ask how is he doing, how is he feeling, he said he’s good, he’s fine.) But he knew I deserted. So finally we came, I sent a letter and that letter reached them on my military address. They made papers. As Polish immigrants, they couldn’t leave Russia. So they came to Lodz and they found me and I got in connection with a guy, a friend of mine, took us by truck to Berlin, we came to _____ (976) to Germany by train and from there to Berlin. I registered with the UNRRA and they took us in big American trucks, they brought us to Hamburg in Germany and over there an American lieutenant came out and said now you are a free people and go wherever you want. So I knew a couple of townspeople are in _____ near Frankfurt am Main, so I went to them and

settled and then we got in touch with my relatives in America and Canada and they sent to us a visa and in 1947 we came here. June 1947.

Have you been in New York all that time?

Yes.

When did you get married?

Here, in 1947.

She was with me all the time with the partisans.

You were with the partisans also? So you were in the woods also?

All the time.

People here can't believe it. They say they can make a movie out of it. For awhile we went to the same school, free tuition, a government school. A cousin of mine with the same name sneaked in in the camp in Grudack. I still can't understand how could he sneak in with a cut-off rifle and he sneaked in under the wires, at night we were sleeping, he sneaked in. How could he come over there. He was 17 years old, a young kid. He had a father over there too. He told us what was going on and he run away and he came to the woods.

Well, I think I've asked all my questions. Is there anything else you want to say before I cut off the tape?

Like I said, I'm proud of myself, I have so many wounds, a wound in my leg, a bullet in my heart. I had something wrong with my nose, I went to the doctor he took x-rays he said, "Mr. Laro, you know you have a piece of metal in your head?" I think for a while and I said, oh, that must be when I fought in Bialystok. I still have it, I feel it. He said, "If it don't bother you, leave it alone."

That's great.