INTRODUCTION TO THE TESTIMONY OF

Yitzhak Arad

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Introduction

Like most survivors, Yitzhak Arad (Rudnitsky) (1926-2021) owed his life to luck, miracles and a readiness to take risks. He was born in 1926 in Święciany (Yiddish: Shventsyan), a small town near Vilna. Today Švenčionys in Lithuania, Święciany was then part of Poland. Arad's father, Yisroel Rudnitsky was a sought after cantor who took the family from their native *shtetl* to sing in synagogues in Zamość and Lublin. In the mid-1930s, Rudnitsky accepted a call to the famous Moriah in Warsaw, the flagship synagogue of the Religious Zionist movement (Mizrakhi), led by Rabbi Yitzkhak Nissenbaum. At a time when more and more young Jews were going to Polish schools and using Polish as a first language, Yitzhak grew up in a staunchly Jewish and Zionist milieu. As a young boy, he attended Hebrew language Tarbut schools and, had the war not begun in September 1939, would have continued his education in the well-known religious Zionist Takhemoni school in Warsaw.

Although the family lived in the big metropolis of Warsaw, they maintained close ties to their native shtetl. Yisroel and Chaya, Arad's mother, always returned there in the summers. Indeed "home" was their native shtetl of Święciany, not Warsaw. During those summers in the 1930s, as Yitzkhak and his sister Rachel got to know their extended family, they also absorbed the "Litvak" folk culture of the shtetl.

Yitzhak's childhood ended abruptly on 1 September 1939, the day the German army invaded Poland. Not yet 13 years old when the war began, he would recall the short-lived Polish-Jewish rapprochement as Poles and Jews worked side by side to dig anti-tank ditches (Tape One:8:24); the shock and disbelief at the rapid collapse of the Polish army; the heavy bombing of Warsaw; and the unforgettable sight of thousands of Polish soldiers forced to pile their weapons in a heap after the capitulation of Warsaw. He

could not forget the Jewish New Year, when a heavy air raid began as his father sang the holiday prayers in the Moriah. Yisroel Rudnitsky stubbornly remained on the podium until his fellow-worshippers begged him to take shelter. Two months later, in November 1939, Arad celebrated his bar-mitzvah in that same synagogue (Tape One:14:50). The worshippers said their prayers quietly as German soldiers barked out orders outside on an adjoining street.

In November 1939 Arad's parents decided that he and his sister Rachel should smuggle themselves across the demarcation line between the German and the Soviet occupation zones and escape to Święciany, now under Soviet rule. Yisroel and Chaya told the children that they would join them later (Tape One: 18:09). On 24 December 1939, Arad and his sister said goodbye to their parents at a Warsaw train station and travelled to Malkinia near the Bug River, where a hired smuggler was waiting to take them across the border.

The smuggler abandoned them at a critical point on the journey, but Arad and his sister crossed the frozen river on their own, slipped past the Soviet border guards and made their way to Święciany, now in Soviet Belarus, just a few miles from the Lithuanian border. After the Soviets extinguished Lithuanian independence in June 1940, Święciany became part of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic.

Yitzhak and Rachel never saw their parents again. Israel and Chaya remained in Warsaw, and probably perished in Treblinka. In the perverse calculus of Holocaust survival, this counted as "luck." Arad later stated that had he remained with his parents he could never have survived. Had his parents been with him, he never would have left the ghetto, and would never have abandoned them to join the partisans. Many Jews who might have survived perished because they refused to leave their loved ones.

Arad's recollections of Święciany under Soviet rule are similar to those of many other survivors from eastern Poland. Unlike most Jews in the shtetl, Yitzhak had seen first-hand how the Germans humiliated and persecuted Jews in Warsaw. Compared to them, life under the Soviets was tolerable. Many Jews, of course, suffered greatly under Soviet rule. Merchants lost their livelihood. The market days that brought the peasants into town and had been vital for the lifeblood of the shtetl economy all but disappeared. The Soviets banned religious education, closed Zionist schools, removed Hebrew books from Jewish libraries, imprisoned political leaders and rabbis and exiled many Jews, especially those from the middle and upper strata. Long lines for food and consumer goods became an everyday experience. On the other hand, many Jews saw their lives improve under the Soviets. Young people, especially from poor families, enjoyed access to secondary and higher education, denied them under the Poles. Many Jews found

work in the lower and middle tiers of city government and in the new nationalized enterprises, posts denied them by the Poles.

Local Poles and Lithuanians were quick to accuse "the Jews" of collaboration with the Soviet occupiers. They pointed to the enthusiastic welcome many Jews had given the Red Army in September 1939. They complained about the unprecedented presence of Jewish policemen, Jewish managers and Jewish postmen. They raged over the alleged Jewish takeover of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. The fact that key posts went to veteran Soviet apparatchiks from the East (*vostochniki*) and not to local Jews; that Jews welcomed the Red Army in September 1939 because they feared Nazi occupation, not because they loved the Soviet system ; and that while many Communists were Jews, very few Jews were Communists, did little to alter the stereotype of the "Zydokommuna," a Jewish-Communist conspiracy. When in 1941 the Germans arrived in Lithuania and eastern Poland, these stereotypes provided the moral alibi that would justify the murder and dispossession of Jewish neighbors. Święciany would be no exception.

Arad seems to have adjusted quickly to Soviet rule. He lived with his relatives, attended a Russian-language school, joined a Soviet youth group (just like everybody else) and even developed a teenage crush (he was 13 -14 years old). On weekends he and his friends hiked and swam in a nearby lake. But he also had a mind of his own; while many young Jews abandoned Zionism and other movements to support the Soviet system, Arad stuck to his Zionist convictions. At some risk to themselves, he and a few friends organized a Zionist underground (Tape One: 26:06). They stole Hebrew books from libraries that the Communists had closed and met in secret to listen to Hebrew language broadcasts from Jerusalem. All the while, he and his sister Rachel were in constant postal contact with their parents in Warsaw. But by this time the border was firmly closed and his parents were trapped in the Warsaw ghetto.

On Sunday June 22, Germany suddenly attacked the Soviet Union (Tape One: 29:03). Unlike many Jews in eastern Poland who had not yet experienced German rule, Arad had few illusions on what to expect. He and some friends tried to run east with the retreating Red Army, but roadside attacks by Lithuanian nationalists forced them to return to the town (Tape One: 31;52). German troops arrived on July 1. Now aged 14, Arad suddenly found himself face to face with terror and murder. His first day back in Święciany, he saw Germans shoot down Soviet POWs. The Germans handed the town over to a Lithuanian civil administration that lost no time in terrorizing the Jewish population. Even before the mass executions began, in the summer of 1941 random killings of Jewish men and boys were a common occurrence (Tape One: 33:33). On July 15, the Germans and Lithuanian collaborators murdered 100 Jews. Arad himself had a narrow escape: Lithuanians forced him onto a truck full of Jews on their way to

a killing site. But at the last minute (Tape One: 34:17) a Lithuanian police officer told him and two other Jews to jump off the truck as he needed them to clean his house.

Now more than ever, Arad needed the support and companionship of a tight-knit circle of close friends, boys his age and a little older. Having ignored a German order to hand over all radios they listened to Stalin's historic speech of 3 July 1941, with its call for organized partisan sabotage behind German lines. That speech made a deep impression on Arad, as later events would show (Tape One: 35:24).

During the summer and fall of 1941, 85% of Lithuanian Jewry perished, including most of the Jews in Święciany, which was part of a German administrative unit called Wilna-Land. Just before the Jewish New Year in September 1941, the local Lithuanian administration told the Święciany Jews to prepare to move to a ghetto in a nearby town (Tape One 36:28). But during the New Year prayers a Jew burst into the synagogue and warned everyone to escape: their lives were in danger. Yitzhak and his close friends decided to escape, but most Jews stayed put. On September 27, the Germans and Lithuanians rounded up all the Jews. They allowed 170 skilled workers and their close families to remain in the town and live in a tiny ghetto close to the former synagogue. 8000 Jews went to a former military camp called the Poligon, where they were held in terrible conditions for many days. On October 7 and 8, Einsatzkommando 3, under the command of Karl Jäger, together with Lithuanian collaborators, murdered nearly all the Jews in the Poligon. Very few escaped. Jäger wrote that he killed 3726 Jews; Jewish sources put the number as closer to 8000 (Tape One: 39:21).

In the meantime, Yitzhak and his friends made a run for nearby Belarus, which was administered by the Germans as *Weissruthenien* and where mass killings of Jews had not yet begun (Tape One: 37:55). After a dangerous trek of 100 kilometers, and with a few arrested and murdered, Arad and his surviving friends ended up in Głębokie (Glebok), which still had no ghetto (it was established one month later). He literally knocked on doors asking for shelter, and was lucky enough to be taken in by a Jewish family who were impressed by his knowledge of Hebrew and his Zionist loyalties (Tape One:38:48). He subsequently secured a job in the ghetto bakery and did not lack for food. In December, however, his sister came to Glebok to take him back to Święciany, where a ghetto now held about 400 Jews (Tape One 45:53). Some members of his close family had escaped the October massacre and offered him a home of sorts. They believed that Święciany, where the Germans had already killed most of the Jews except for valuable craftsmen, was safer than Glebok, where no massacre had yet happened.

Now back in the Święciany Ghetto, Arad and some of his friends were sent to a work detail that sorted and cleaned captured Soviet weapons. Here he made a snap decision that would have far-reaching consequences. When the German guard was not looking, he shoved a sawn-off rifle under his jacket and smuggled it into the ghetto (Tape One 50:06). He did this on impulse and ignored the enormous risk that he was taking. After all, all Jews who returned to the ghetto from work details were searched at the gate. But since they were escorted into the ghetto by German guards, the Lithuanian police let them in without a search. On the following days, he and his friends smuggled a few more weapons into the ghetto, making plans to form a fighting group and join the partisans. He was not yet 16 years old! This incident shows a remarkable ability to take risks and act decisively. This would not be the last example.

From this point, the issue of Jewish armed resistance, and the particular challenges and dilemmas it posed for Jews, becomes a major theme in this testimony. It is important to mention that this particular transcript only touches on certain aspects of Arad's experiences, which are described more fully in his Hebrew language autobiography.

Arad describes how his group's plan for armed resistance was firmly and angrily rejected by his relatives, the Judenrat, and almost all the Jews left in the ghetto. His account of their hostility echoes accounts from other small ghettos in eastern Poland, where thick forests and the reputed presence of a Soviet partisan movement gave Jews options to survive that they did not have in central Poland, but where escape from the ghetto threatened those who remained with German reprisals (Tape 2 5:30).

These youngsters who had courageously stolen German weapons and bullets and planned to become partisans had absolutely no military training, had never handled firearms and had absolutely no clue where any Soviet partisans were located. They had no idea how to survive in a forest. Luckily, some had contacts with local gentiles; this would play a vital role in their future survival.

No sooner had they smuggled some weapons into the ghetto than disaster struck (Tape One: 54:34). One boy in the group, Ruven Miadzolsky, waved a pistol and boasted to his close friend, Gershon Back, that if he saw a German just then he would blow his head off. At that moment, the pistol went off and a bullet hit Gershon in the mouth. Ruven had had no idea that the pistol was loaded. Unfortunately they were close to the ghetto gate, and a Lithuanian guard at the gate heard the shot and came to investigate.

The Judenrat, terrified that the Germans would use the shooting as an excuse to destroy the ghetto, tried to explain away the incident. Doctor Taraseiski, who had treated the wounded boy and who was a

Judenrat member, told the German security police that the children had found the pistol by chance. But he failed to convince the German security police, who savagely tortured the two boys. Fortunately for Arad, they died without divulging the names of their friends (Tape One 58:08). Furious and worried, the Judenrat now tried to ship Arad and his friends to some labor detail outside the ghetto. Not only did the boys refuse the order to leave, they even marched into a Judenrat meeting and demanded, in no uncertain terms, large sums of money to buy weapons. Ignoring shouts and threats, they repeated their demands.

In the spring of 1942, Arad's group prepared to leave the ghetto for a nearby forest. But just as they were about to depart, the Judenrat and their own relatives blocked their path (Tape One 55:58). In no uncertain terms, the Judenrat told them that their plan put every Jew in the ghetto at risk. In a ghetto of only 400 people, it would be impossible to conceal their absence. The boys grudgingly admitted that the Judenrat had a point and stayed put. For the next year they remained in the ghetto. Arad took a job in a sawmill, and he and his friends bided their time.

Years later, as Arad looked back on these fraught confrontations with the Judenrat and with his own relatives, he appreciated that their rage had been totally justified. Scholarly research, especially by Isaiah Trunk and Aaron Weiss, has corrected a once widely held opinion that most ghetto Jews despised the Jewish Councils. While in some cases this was true, it is a fact that a large number of survivors held a positive view of the Jewish Councils in their town. And despite the sharp confrontations that he had with them, Arad nonetheless respected the integrity of the Judenrat members, especially his former teacher Motl Gilinski. He knew that they had the best interests of the Jews at heart, as they understood them.

In early 1943 the Germans forced many Jews from surrounding towns into the Święciany ghetto and, as its population swelled to over 2500, Arad and his friends realized that it would now be easier to leave and not be missed. While they still lacked any contacts with Soviet partisans, they did now have a link to the biggest Jewish resistance organization in the area, the United Partisan Organization (FPO) in the Vilna Ghetto. After the Germans made Vilna-ghetto commandant Jacob Gens administratively responsible for the Święciany ghetto, Jewish police from Vilna went to Święciany. Arad and his friends made contact with policemen who were also members of the FPO (Tape Two 6:16).

In April 1943, Arad and a friend decided to go to Vilna to make contact with the resistance group. In order to get there, they rode on the transport that was to transfer 5000 Jews from the Święciany ghetto and other towns to Kovno (Kaunas), with a stop in Vilna (Tape Two 8:54). Jacob Gens, the Jewish

commandant of the Vilna Ghetto, assured the Jews that the transport was really going to Kovno, and that the German officials there needed the extra Jewish workers. Gens offered to accompany the transport himself. When the train got to Vilna, a few cars, including one that carried Arad, were detached from the train. But instead of proceeding to Kovno, the train took the Jews to the nearby killing fields of Ponary. Despite ferocious resistance, the Germans and their Lithuanian collaborators murdered close to 5000 Jews that day. The massacre marked the end of the 15 months of relative quiet in the Vilna Ghetto. It compromised the authority of Jacob Gens, who had vouched for the safety of the Jews (Tape Two 14:02). In an ominous move, the Germans told Vilna Ghetto police to go to the killing site to collect the belongings of the victims. They no longer bothered to conceal what was happening at Ponary.

In Vilna, Arad met with leaders of the FPO, including the charismatic and controversial Abba Kovner. One may guess that they probably did not take a 16-year-old boy all that seriously. Arad tried to persuade them to leave the ghetto and join the Soviet partisans in the forests (Tape Two 14:38). They would not do so. Their plan was to fight in the ghetto when the Germans began the final liquidation. Hopefully the battle would allow many Jews to escape.

There were some important reasons why the FPO decided to fight in the ghetto instead of the forest. To leave the ghetto meant abandoning the Jewish population. There was also the question of Jewish honor. If they fought in the forest, their struggle would be remembered as part of the Soviet struggle against the Germans. If they fought in the ghetto, they would be remembered as Jewish fighters. In far away Krakow, another young Jew had remarked that “we are fighting for three lines in history.” This sums up the FPO leadership thinking.

The FPO’s arguments for staying in the ghetto made little sense to Arad, who believed that the forest offered the best chance for survival and for taking revenge on the Germans. He and his friend snuck onto a northbound German train, returned to the Święciany area, and rejoined their friends who had established a camp in a nearby forest. Helped by a few friendly gentiles, they avoided police dragnets and tried desperately to find Soviet partisans (Tape Two:23:10). In May 1943 they finally made contact with the Chapayev unit of the Voroshilov brigade (Tape Two 25:24).

This brigade was commanded by Fyodor Markov, a Belarussian who had taught in the Yiddish school in Święciany and was married to a Jewish woman (Tape Two 2:20). Many Jewish partisans would remember him positively. Arad's unit, however, was commanded by one Sidiakin, a colorful character

nicknamed “The Clear Sea” (*Yasnoye Mor’ye*). If Arad and his friend had hoped for a warm welcome from Sidiakin and his fellow partisans, they were in for a rude shock. No sooner had they arrived at the base than Sidiakin made them hand over their weapons to non-Jewish fighters, who, he pointed out, had more military experience. He then sent some of the newly arrived Jewish boys on a dangerous mission. Having lost their weapons, they were now supposed to find new ones by ambushing Germans and collaborators! To defend themselves, Sidiakin gave them one sawn-off rifle and one pistol. This was Arad’s first experience with vicious antisemitism in the Soviet partisan movement, and would not be his last (Tape Two 25:51).

With its large forests and swamps, this whole area of Belarus and eastern Lithuania was well suited to partisan warfare. In 1941 and early 1942, Red Army stragglers and escapees from German POW camps had formed ad hoc bands of marauders whose main goal had been simple survival; attacks on Germans were a much lower priority. There was no direction from above and hardly any organization.

The Soviet government tried to impose some control over the emerging partisan movement, but it was no easy task. In May 1942 it established the Central Bureau of the Partisan Movement, directed by Belarussian party boss Pantaleimon Ponamorenko. The Bureau laid down goals for partisan activity: attacks on German railroads and garrisons, the disruption of telephone and telegraph lines, the punishment of collaborators, the imposition of Soviet authority in the occupied areas. For a long time, certainly until the second half of 1943, these goals remained largely aspirational.

Many serious problems beset the partisan movement, problems that are reflected in Arad’s testimony and, even more so, his Hebrew language autobiography. The lack of effective control from above, spotty radio contact with the Soviet command, and serious shortages of weapons and explosive materials compromised the military effectiveness of most partisan formations. This would remain the case until late 1943 and early 1944, when airdrops finally began to deliver usable weapons and explosives in quantity.

In the absence of effective organization and coordination, individual commanders had a great deal of leeway and, as a result, conditions within units varied widely. Alcoholism was rampant. Overzealous commanders executed partisans on the slightest pretext. More often than not, women had to trade sex for protection within the unit. Living conditions were abysmal, the norm being earthen dugouts. Despite attempts in some units to maintain minimal standards of sanitation, lice infestation was the norm. The changing seasons also posed a challenge. Winter brought welcome darkness, conducive to operations,

but it also allowed the Germans and their local auxiliaries to follow partisan tracks in the snow. Long hours of daylight in the summer made it harder for partisans to move unobserved and brought swarms of insects. Autumn and spring turned the dirt tracks in the forests into sometimes impassable quagmires of mud.

No problem was more immediate or pressing for the partisan units than food. This meant that the partisans spent far more effort on "economic" than on military missions. Simply put, during these "economic missions" partisans entered a peasant village or farm and requisitioned food, cows, horses, carts and anything else that they needed. Peasants who resisted were often killed and their homes burned. Since peasants in Belarus were among the poorest in pre-war Eastern Europe, it was only natural that these requisitions sparked deep resentment, especially as a partisan unit that remained in a particular base for a long time had to make repeated forays into the same villages. Soviet historiography portrayed the partisan movement as an inspiring instance of popular uprising against the Nazis. But one should not accept at face value the received wisdom of a "peoples' war" against the German occupier. By late 1943 more and more Belarussian peasants had come to support the partisans, partly because they now knew that the Red Army was returning, partly in reaction to deportations for forced labor in the Reich, and partly as a response to savage German reprisals that saw entire villages burned and massacred to create "dead zones" that deprived the partisans of logistical support. Some historians estimate that up to a quarter of the entire population of Belarus perished during the German occupation. But while Belarussian peasant support for the Soviet partisans did increase over time, the reaction of Poles and Lithuanians is a different story.

The area where Arad lived and fought was an ethnic mélange of Belarussians, Poles, Lithuanians and Jews, with the last mostly murdered by mid-1943. This region had belonged to Poland before 1939, and the Polish Home Army units roamed the same forests where Arad fought with the Soviet partisans, determined to reassert Polish control. The Soviet partisans, of course, rejected Polish claims and saw these lands as Soviet. By early 1944, as Arad tells us, Soviet partisans were fighting the Polish Home Army as much as they were fighting the Germans and, as his testimony shows, the Soviet partisans suffered heavy losses in these battles.

Germans also began to use inter-ethnic rivalries as an effective weapon against the Soviet partisans, Lithuanians and Jews. While many Belarussian peasants "were on the fence", at least until mid- to late-1943, the Polish and Lithuanian peasantry was anti-Soviet and, one should say, antisemitic. One of the major themes of Arad's testimony is Polish and Lithuanian antisemitism in the Święciany region. Besides

the standard alibi of alleged Jewish collaboration with the Soviets, many Poles and Lithuanians had also enriched themselves with Jewish property. As the Soviet partisan movement grew stronger, the Germans gave Polish and Lithuanian peasants weapons to defend themselves against Soviet partisans. By 1944 they even made informal cease-fire deals with individual Polish Home Army units to enable the latter to fight Soviet partisans.

The Soviet partisans in turn launched savage raids on villages that they accused of having collaborated with the Germans. One of these raids took place at Koniuchy in January 1944, where a Soviet partisan unit, which included several Jews, burned the village and killed at least 38 villagers. Years later, Lithuanian prosecutors would begin an investigation into Arad's role in the massacre. Since the Lithuanian judicial system had shown very little interest in prosecuting Lithuanians involved in the mass slaughter of Jews, this sudden zeal to prosecute Arad and other Jewish partisans appeared hypocritical. Arad, who was nowhere near Koniuchy at the time, was indignant and resigned from a historical commission that had been established by the Lithuanian government to investigate the Holocaust in Lithuania. Bowing to word-wide protest, the Lithuanians chose not to pursue the case. That said, what happened in Koniuchy underscores the brutalization and savagery that defined life in western Belarus and eastern Lithuania during the German occupation. In a recent Hebrew language doctoral dissertation, the Israeli historian Daniella Ozacky-Stern, examining oral testimonies of eyewitness Jewish partisans, concludes that Jewish partisans indeed acted with great brutality, for which the record of the Koniuchy villagers gave reason. It should also be mentioned here that Arad himself admitted to being ordered by his commander to shoot a woman suspected of espionage. He complied, reluctantly, and never forgot the incident. He did not refer to this in his testimony but described it in his autobiography.

Viewers of this testimony will note that Arad participated in many successful attacks on German trains that were carrying supplies to Army Group North. He also helped cut down telegraph and telephone lines and embarked on a risky mission to rescue a Soviet functionary held in a hospital in German-occupied Święciany. But while there is no disputing Arad's courage, one should not overestimate the overall military effectiveness of the Soviet partisan movement. Arad himself writes about resourceful German countermeasures that made it harder to mine supply trains and that limited the damage when the mines exploded (Tape Two 41:52). All the while, German pressure on the partisans steadily increased. Periodic search and destroy operations or "blockades," described by Arad, forced partisan units to disband into tiny groups, slip through the German lines, and regroup in another forest (Tape Two 56:36). His testimony records some very close calls, when he cheated death by the barest of

margins. As the front lines moved westward in late 1943 and early 1944, German anti-partisan operations became more determined and more lethal. They took an especially heavy toll in the spring of 1944, just before the beginning of Operation Bagratyon, the great Soviet offensive that destroyed German Army Group Center and drove the Germans out of Belarus. On the one hand, while partisan activity was a serious nuisance it was rarely the case that attacks on German trains and trucks had any strategic value. On the other hand, there is no question that this war behind the lines forced the Germans to divert troops otherwise employed at the front. It also gave the Germans one more excuse to murder the civilian population, just as it enabled the Soviet authorities to remind the local inhabitants that the Kremlin had a long reach.

Jews who had survived the German massacres in western Belarus naturally sought refuge in the forests, and many pinned their hopes on the Soviet partisan movement. While Polish and Lithuanian partisans usually murdered Jews they encountered in these forests (Narocz, Koziany, Rudniki), the Soviet partisans were at least in theory supposed to extend help and protection to all Soviet citizens. But there was a real difference between theory and reality: many Jews, including Arad, were shocked by the antisemitism that they encountered in Soviet units.

Many factors determined how Soviet partisan commanders and ordinary non-Jewish fighters viewed Jews, and commanders' behavior varied widely. Some were friendly and did what they could to help Jews survive. Commanders and officers such as Pavel Pronyagin and Nikolai Kiselyov deserve special mention in this regard. But others were downright hostile. Arad's initial experience with Sidiakin reveals Jews forced on dangerous missions with inadequate protection. There were many other factors that complicated the enlistment of Jews in Soviet partisan units. Most of the time, partisan commanders refused to accept people who did not have a weapon. Jews were also asked why they had stayed in the ghettos for so long. They were perfectly willing to work for the Germans, they were told, and only now, after they had escaped the massacres, did they show up in the forests and expect Soviet partisans to protect them.

In late 1943 and 1944 the situation of Jews in many units improved because of tighter disciple and more supplies, which enabled more fighters to receive weapons. Many Jews also found employment in partisan bases as cooks, tailors, shoemakers, etc. But even as their situation improved, in one respect matters took a turn for the worse because of the enlistment of many Ukrainians, Belarussians and Russians who had served as German auxiliaries and who now wanted to change sides and join the

partisans in order to save their skins. Deeply antisemitic, many of these new partisans did not hesitate to shoot their Jewish comrades in the back in the middle of a mission.

One incident in particular underscores the fraught status of Jews in some Soviet partisan detachments. After the FPO of the Vilna Ghetto realized that it lacked support from the ghetto population for an armed uprising, many of its leaders changed their previous opposition to leaving the ghetto for the forests. By September 1943, a number of FPO veterans left the Vilna Ghetto with their weapons and reached the Narocz forests. There Markov allowed them to form a separate Jewish unit named Nekome ("Revenge"). But in September 1943 an order came from the Central Partisan Bureau to disband the Jewish unit. The excuse was that the Soviet partisan movement was organized on a territorial and not on a national basis. Since Jews had no territory of their own, they could not form a separate unit. A top party official, Ivan Klimov, also explained that an all-Jewish unit incited the antisemitism of the peasantry and played into the hands of German propaganda.

The members of Nekome were ordered to line up and enter the command dugout one by one. In the dugout they were stripped of their weapons and their valuables. Jews who had risked so much to acquire weapons in the Vilna Ghetto and elsewhere now lost them. To add to the humiliation, after they lost their weapons and valuables, only a few were allowed to join fighting units: the rest were left to their own devices. A couple of days later the Germans launched a major search and destroy operation in the forest. The non-Jewish partisans left the area and warned the Jews not to follow them. Many Jews perished, while some took shelter in a remote island in the middle of a large swamp. Sometime later, the Soviet partisans returned. Those who survived the blockade were later integrated into new units after air drops delivered more weapons and discipline improved. But Jewish survivors never forgot the humiliation that they suffered that day.

Arad's testimony also refers to another subject that greatly disturbed the Jewish partisans: the desperate situation of ordinary Jews who tried to survive in the forests in so-called "family camps" (Tape Two 53:12). Without weapons and protection, these Jews were forced to steal food from the peasants in order to live. When the Germans mounted their search and destroy operations, these Jews were the first victims. For the most part, Soviet partisan commanders refused to help them. Jewish partisans did try to supply the family camps with food, but they did so in defiance of explicit orders and risked a death sentence if they were caught. (My own uncle was sentenced to death for bringing food to a Jewish family camp but was reprieved at the last moment.)

One might say that Arad had a relatively fortunate experience that spared him some of the humiliation that other Jewish partisans suffered. Shortly after his unpleasant encounter with Sidiakin, some new commanders arrived in the area who had been parachuted in from Moscow and ordered to set up a partisan movement in Lithuania. These commanders, Motiejus Šumanauskas and Genrikas Zimanas, organized a new Lithuanian brigade called Żalgiris and, when they learned that Arad was from Święciany (part of Soviet Lithuania), asked him to join (Tape Two:30:26). Anxious to escape the antisemitism in Sidiakin's unit, Arad readily agreed, and this would be his partisan home for the rest of the war, which Arad fought in the Koziany and Narocz forests.

How many Jews fought in Soviet partisan units in Belarus? In a book published many years later, Arad estimated their number at between 10,650 and 13,500. The Israeli scholar Daniella Ozacky-Stern calculates that in the Narocz and Koziany forests there were 12,500 partisans overall, of whom 950 - 1,100 were Jews. Of the 700 partisans in the Rudniki forests, 600 to 700 were Jews. Ozacky-Stern believes that 78% of Jewish partisans survived the war. It is even more difficult to calculate the survival rate of Jews in family camps. In the best-known case, the unit headed by Tuvia Bielski, 1,200 Jews survived. In the forests where Arad fought, the survival rate was lower. Nonetheless, in Belarus during the war, the forest offered Jews much better chances for survival than the ghettos and German camps.

The nightmare of German occupation ended for Arad in July 1944 as the Red Army returned. For Arad, as for many other survivors, there was little joy after the "liberation." It was only now, when the struggle for life had abated, that they could feel the crushing weight of the disaster that had destroyed their families, their towns, and the world of Polish Jewry. The immediate problem that Arad faced was how to leave Soviet-controlled Lithuania and get to Poland, which offered more opportunities to reach Palestine. Now a member of Soviet security forces fighting Lithuanian nationalist partisans, in the same forests where he himself had been only months before, he knew that his chances of securing permission to leave legally were slim. Once again, Arad showed his readiness to make snap decisions and take risks. Faking his death at the hands of the Lithuanian partisans, he secured false documents, slipped away to Poland, and made contact with Zionist emissaries, who helped him travel south.

Not yet 20 years old when the war ended, after a harrowing journey across war-torn Europe, Arad landed on the shores of British-controlled Palestine as an illegal immigrant on 25 December 1945. Thanks to his knowledge of Hebrew and his record as a partisan hero, Arad, unlike many survivors, was welcomed with open arms by the Jews of the kibbutz movement. He arrived in Palestine at a difficult time: Jews were fighting both the British, who still refused to allow Jewish immigration, and the

Palestinian Arabs. While the Jews accepted the UN Partition Resolution of November 29 1947, the Palestinian Arabs rejected it, and a bloody war broke out. On May 14, the day the British left, the Jews proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel and Arab troops from Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq immediately invaded. Arad fought in the Israeli War of Independence, as a member of the elite Palmach shock troops. When the war was over, he stayed in the army and rose to the rank of Brigadier General in the armored corps.

After the Six Day War, Arad became Chief Education Officer of the IDF, a position he used to shape the national conversation about Jewish resistance and Jewish experience during the Holocaust. In the early years of Israeli statehood, the national conversation about the Holocaust not only glorified the ghetto fighters and the partisans but also regarded them as heroes who had save the honor of the Jewish people. Consequently, many young people grew up accepting an invidious comparison between the few who fought with weapons and the millions who supposedly went "like sheep to the slaughter." As Lea Ganor has pointed out, Arad tried to make Israelis rethink what "resistance" really meant. Armed resistance was not the only way to fight back. Spritual resistance, cultural resistance, religious resistance, self-help, the ongoing struggle to survive in the grim conditions of the ghetto were also important. And just as he rejected an overly facile view of resistance, Arad called also for a more nuanced evaluation of the Jewish Councils and their leaders (Tape Three 35:52). In his role as Chief Education Officer, and then in his many scholarly works, he stressed the difficult position that these leaders faced and rejected simplistic labels such as "collaboration" or "betrayal."

In 1972 Arad became the director of Yad Vashem. He transformed the Museum. On his watch Yad Vashem rethought its missions and goals as it expanded its educational outreach, archival holdings and exhibits. When Arad was director, Yad Vashem built the Valley of the Communities and made plans for the Children's Memorial, which would be designed by Moshe Safdie. He also shaped the permanent exhibit that would be in place until 2005. After the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR, Arad played a key role in copying and bringing to Yad Vashem the enormous archival collections on Jewish history and the Holocaust that suddenly became available.

In 1974 Arad earned a doctorate in History from Tel Aviv University. His thesis on the Vilna Ghetto was later published as *Ghetto in Flames* (1980). He went on to publish many other books, including *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (1987), *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (2009), *In the Shadow of the Red Banner* (2010), an autobiography in Hebrew, *Khoret be'Zikaron* (2016), and a thought-provoking book on ethical dilemmas in the Holocaust, *Ze kara be'planetah shelanu.* His

books are all the more important because they were written by an accomplished historian who also had the moral authority of a survivor and a partisan.