

The Story of Sarah from Ivatzevichi

by Leonid Smilovitsky

Sarah Kopeliensky of Ivatzevichi was the lone member of her immediate family to survive World War II. This story recreates her pre-war life, recounts her service with partisans fighting the Germans, and her fate to the present. Ivatzevichi belonged to Poland when she was born but is now located in Belarus.

From the history of the townlet

According to the Lithuanian Record, the estate of Ivatzevichi was transferred in 1519 to Jewish merchants from Grodno.¹ From 1654 Ivatzevichi was known as the estate of Yan Victorian, Judge of Slonim, Elder of Skidel and Mosty. For a century it was part of the Slonim District, Novohrudok Province, in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. It was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1795. Not far off was "Merechevshchina," the ancestral estate of Kosciusko.² During 1863-1864, Ivatzevichi constituted part of the area involved in the uprising of Kastus Kalinowski against the Tsar's government.³

The laying of the railroad from Brest to Moscow began next to Ivatzevichi in 1871. A small settlement arose where people engaged in forestry, ran a small distillery, a brick factory, and a water mill. During World War I, Ivatzevichi was occupied by the German armies of Kaiser Wilhelm II, and in 1919-1920 by those of Poland. After a brief rule by Soviet forces, July-August 1920, it came under Polish rule and from 1921-1939 belonged to the Casava District, Paillasse Province.

The family

Sarah was born 9 September 1925 to Benzoin and Miriam Kopeliensky. Benzoin, born in Kletzk, had studied economic, politics and law in the Higher Commerce School in Warsaw. He was a handsome man, tall and svelte, always well-dressed in the latest style. Benzoin's cousins went to America in 1900, but he decided to remain in the old country.

After their wedding, the young couple moved to Ivatzevichi, where they helped Miriam's father Jacob Rozhansky. Jacob had a business of timber, pressed straw, and fodder. He had come to Ivatzevichi from Pinsk, where he had married Sarah Livshitz [Leibeschutz], and had nine children. After Jacob's death, his business was inherited in equal parts by Benzoin Kopeliensky and Chaim Rozhansky, Miriam's brother.

Miriam observed the traditions of Judaism, although she rarely showed up in the synagogue. In the housework she was helped by the village girl Ustina, who she trusted. Occasionally, Ustina brought in a friend from the army for an overnight stay. Sarah did not understand what they were doing. She would enter the kitchen for a glass of water or a sandwich in the hope of "catching" them.

The Kopelienskys spoke Yiddish and Polish. Benzoin subscribed to Hebrew periodicals from Palestine, including the newspaper Davar. The journals and newspaper files were bound and shared with friends. Benzoin never returned from Warsaw without gifts. To his daughter he brought sweets; to his wife cuts of cloth, woolen fabric, fur collars for vests and dresses, even silver buttons.



Fig. 1 - Sarah in Ivatzevichi, 1934

Pre-war Ivatzevichi

The townlet had a relatively modern layout. Streets were laid out parallel to each other. The Kopeliensky's house consisted of three large rooms, a spacious kitchen, and accessory rooms. It was a solid timber building, like the majority of Ivatzevichi structures. Benzoin's diploma, signed by his twenty-nine professors, hung in a place of

honor in the dining room. Sarah was very proud of her father's achievement.

The population of the townlet totaled about 3,000 inhabitants. Ivatzevichi was surrounded by remarkable pine forests with mushroom spotted floors. Sarah and friends used to go to the woods together where they hanged hammocks, read books, or simply had fun with children's games. Sometimes they would go to the mill, where they played hide-and-seek, and rolled a barrow on rails up and down. If someone had a sliver in their hand, Sarah was better than others at extracting it with a needle.

After 1921, Poles from Poznan were transferred to Ivatzevichi in order to change the demographic composition of the place, which had a Belarus majority. Belarus villages and hamlets dotted the landscape. Relations were friendly



Fig. 2 - Chaim and Miriam Rozhansky, 1912

among Jews, Poles, Belorussians, and Ukrainians. There was nothing to covet as most people lived from hand to mouth. In Bentzion's and Chaim's business, most of the employees were Ukrainian. They chopped timber in Telekhany and in Sviataya Volya, conveyed it to Ivatzevichi on narrow-gauge rails, where it was loaded on flatcars and sent all over Poland.

The forests of Ivatzevichi abounded with magnificent pine, spruce, oak, and hornbeam. The pride of the region was its eleven lakes, the largest being Lake Vygonoshchansk.

The dense Belovezha Forest began near Telekhany. The area was traversed by the stream named Grivda, a tributary of the Shchara River, which flowed into the Neman. People go there from Warsaw, Brest, and Grodno to hunt for elks, boars, deer, rabbits, beaver, otter, and wolves. The most extensive of untouched Belarus swamps was near Ivatzevichi. A canal through the Oginsk, Vygonoshchansk and Vulka-Telekhany lakes connected the Yasselda River with the Shchara River, and consequently, the Black Sea with the Baltic.⁴

Jewish life

The Jews were a minority in Ivatzevichi—a shoemaker, a tailor, a barber, a blacksmith, and a baker. Despite the small size of the community, there was a rabbi and a little synagogue. Since there was no cemetery; Jews were taken to Casava for burial. Sarah rarely went to the synagogue, but without fail went on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. For the Passover meal, the relatives with their children all gathered at the Kopelianskys. On Purim the little ones received sweets, and there was much rejoicing. Benzoin loved to treat guests with delicacies that he brought back from his travels: honey, cheese and village bread; berries and mushrooms; exotic fruit, bananas, grapes, and canned pineapple; goat cheese, and various smoked foods.

The little girls loved to spend time in the smithy, observing how old Moshe cleverly shoed horses. The master blacksmith would lower the hot iron into the flaming furnace, strike it with a small hammer, then fit the horseshoe to the horse's hoof. Sarah would run to the Jewish bakery to buy *bagele*. Leyt [Leight] the baker prepared wonderful bagels. He would pull them out of the oven and offer them, still hot, with butter and cherry jam. The Chomskys would invite Sarah on Saturday to taste their *cholent*, which she found uncommonly tasty. The elder Chomsky was very religious and always prayed. A shoemaker, he would hold the wooden nails in his mouth, which he smartly inserted in the slits of the soles and fastened with a hammer. Sarah could watch his movements for hours; finding it more entertaining than the circus. Uncle Chaim, Miriam's brother, often took his niece to the milk bar, where she took part in a chocolate lottery.

Across the road there was a pharmacy, where Shapiro, a short old man (to Sarah everybody in those days was old) prepared compounds according to the prescriptions of Doctor Kozlovsky. Sarah would sit there for hours and help package powders and medicines. Her memory retains images of the long cabinets with white jars with Latin labels. Shapiro used to say that Sarah was the future bride of his son, who studied at a university in Warsaw, and who seldom visited his father. The little girl was then ten years old. Shapiro was very happy with his joke, introducing his little neighbor as a bride.

Sarah remained an only child in the family. Her father required her to apply herself to her studies, which she found agreeable. Every day, after attending Polish school, Sarah had a private tutor, who would come even during school

vacations. She studied Tenach, Chumash, "Palestinography," Hebrew grammar and even delved into the work of Rashi. Her mother inculcated in Sarah a love of reading. Eventually her beloved authors became Sigrid Undset, Jack London, Knut Hamsen, Romain Rolland, along with Polish and Russian authors whose works she devoured during the long winter evenings. This lasted until age twelve, when the time came to enter the Slonim gymnasium school in 1937. Travel to Slonim in those days took about an hour by train.

Slonim

The Kunitz Gymnasium in Slonim was considered the best educational institution in town. In their time, Miriam and Aunt Raya, Miriam's first-cousin, studied there. As all teachers and students were Jewish, Sarah felt at home. The students studied Hebrew four hours a week. Lessons on other subjects were taught in Polish. Miriam would often send Sarah a sponge cake, one of her favorites.

Slonim had Jewish organizations and a vibrant public life. Benzoin did not approve of her participation in youth organizations. He was a committed Zionist and was ready to condemn all leftists. Nevertheless, in spite of his prohibition, Sarah attended meetings of Hashomer Hatzair, where she enjoyed listening to debates on "serious issues."

Sarah's behavior in the gymnasium was not always exemplary. She laughed a lot, conversed in class, and was even expelled from the classroom on occasion. The principal, named Teller, was sympathetic to Sarah. If he met her in the hallway, he would take her hand, ask why she was expelled, and then take her back to class with the words that "she won't do it again." She was always asked to present him flowers in the name of the class on his birthday.

The gymnasium had a wonderful atmosphere. Sarah easily made friends and soon became acquainted with Beno Plavsky, who was two grades older than she. Beno had her own room and her food was prepared by an attendant named Tanya. Sarah's best friend was Ada Gurvich. Sarah liked Yuta, a tall slender girl, with a long braid. There was also red-headed Milla, who used to ask in the middle of class what time it was, as she couldn't wait for the recess. Next to Sarah sat her cousin, Chayah Rozhansky, a serious student whose Latin translations Sarah used to crib.

Sarah's cousins lived on Ulanskaya Street, near the Shchara River. In their home she met Folle Zack, a blond boy with blue eyes, who was eyed by many girls. After lunch she and Folle would take walks on Paradnaya Street, where "everybody" gathered. On days off, Uncle Chaim Rozhansky would visit Sarah in Slonim. Sarah shared her girl's secrets with the Rozhansky elder daughter Lisa. Lisa tended Chaim's deaf-and-dumb sister and his blind father who also lived in the home on Ulanskaya.⁵

The coming of the Soviets

Everybody feared the onslaught of the Germans. Nobody expected anything good from Hitler. Given this, the Soviet Red Army was welcomed joyfully with flowers when it arrived on 17 September 1939. Most of the people lived

frugally. There was nothing to expropriate from a tailor, a shoemaker, a carpenter, or a glazier.

Benzoin voluntarily gave up his business and applied to be taken to Leningrad to continue his education. Eventually he moved to Baranovichi and took a job in a bank, where he received a good position, while Sarah's mother remained in Ivatzevichi. Since Sarah had to continue her studies, she lived with her father in Baranovichi, where they rented a room from a Jewish woman. Sarah's best friends were now Dvosha (Devorah) and Vanda Gvozdoich.



Fig. 3 - Sarah at the Gimnazia Kunitsy, 1937

Soviet schooling was simplistic. Under the Soviets, lessons had to be mastered by rote, without deviation. Only during the "Polish hour" was it normal in school to dispute, express one's own opinion, and share observations. The students were not accustomed to this, and Sarah once complained. Sophia Isaacovna, teacher of Russian language and literature, listened then answered, "With us it's different. And that's how it will be."

In January 1940, Ivatzevichi was included in the Casava District of the Brest *oblast*. It comprised 3,000 square kilometers, or nine percent of the *oblast* territory. The new district bordered on the west by the Berioza District, on the southwest the Ivanovo District, on the south—the Pinsk District, on the east—the Baranovichi, Liakhovichi, and Gantzevichi Districts, on the northwest—the Pruzhany District, and on the north—the Slonim District of the Grodno *oblast*.

Ivatzevichi was strategically located, lying on the Brest-Minsk railroad, the Brest-Moscow highway, and at the crossroads of five other motor roads, which connected the area to Lithuania, Russia, Poland, and Germany.

German occupation

The Germans occupied the townlet on 24 June 1941, only two days after the declaration of war on Russia. The Nazis decreed the confiscation of all state property and all Jewish possessions. People were deprived of homes, livestock, bread, clothing, and other “wealth.” Many Belorussians and Poles were also chased out of their homes, to make room for German military personnel. They instituted two jails and a police precinct in Ivatzevichi. Orders were issued establishing a curfew.⁶ In the street, patrols would seize passers-by and if they were without papers, would declare them to be partisans. Those who resisted could be shot on the spot; or, best case, be sent to prison. At night the police would open fire without warning, and in the morning local inhabitants were forced to bury the victims in unmarked graves.⁷ Thus, the Shimansky (five persons) and Multon (six persons) families perished in this manner.⁸

In jail people were cruelly tortured, starved, and beaten with sticks. The cells were overfilled. People died from lack of air, from beatings and from emaciation, or committed suicide. So perished the Bogudsky, Bogatyreva, and Shmir families. A man named Goyshchik was killed while being interrogated. The occupying power carried out public executions. A gallows was built on the plaza. Patriots named Tzak, Minchuk, Kludko, among others, were hanged for contact with the partisans and for sabotage. All inhabitants of Ivatzevichi were forced to witness the executions.⁹

The Germans changed the composition of the police a few times. They dismissed the Polish policemen, suspecting disloyalty and shot their officers. Later they recruited Belorussians into the police, and shortly thereafter, replaced them with Ukrainians.

Jewish ghetto

On the eve of the war, Benzoin and Sarah came to her mother in Ivatzevichi for a summer vacation. The Germans evicted them from their home together with her parents, and established a military headquarters there. Benzoin, Miriam, and Sarah settled, together with other Jewish families, in a small hotel which had ten rooms. The whole street was inhabited only by Jews; about two hundred people. Not all were original inhabitants, as the Jewish population of Ivatzevichi had been enlarged by refugees from other regions of Poland, previously seized by the Germans in September 1939.

The occupying power ordered Jews to attach yellow six-pointed stars in circles of fabric to their garments. In despair, Shapiro the Pharmacist poisoned himself. Benzoin Kopeliansky, being highly respected and knowing German, was appointed Elder over the Jews. He had a reputation as being honest and understanding, always ready to help. While

it was good for the Jews to have a Jewish leader, the Germans wanted him to be their henchman.¹⁰

The Jewish ghetto was set up on the outskirts of the village, along a street that was parallel to the main street of Ivatzevichi and abutted the railroad station. It was fenced with barbed wire. Inmates were taken out to do cleaning or construction work, or loading and unloading trains at the station. The food ration was meager, consisting of 200 gr. of bread per day. Max Schulke and another named Bliffert were German officers that stood out for their cruelty.¹¹

The Jews had premonitions concerning their fate but were defenseless. Villagers from the area would come into the ghetto, saying “Give us everything; you’ll be killed anyway.” The only escape was to the forest but once there, it was necessary to find the partisans. Sarah was friends with Jonah Yanovich, whose brother left for Palestine before the war. Jonah’s mother begged Sarah to dissuade her son from going to the forest. She believed that it was impossible to survive there.

In February 1942, Ivatzevichi Jews were marched on foot to Casava. A snowstorm struck and some lost hands and feet to frostbite. Aunt Feiga lost her fingers, having given Sarah her mittens. In Casava they could not accommodate the mass of newcomers and two days later they were marched back. The Germans forced Jews to relinquish all their gold, including gold teeth. Sarah remembered a pile of valuables on the table in their room. Her father was ordered to deliver everything to the Germans.¹²

An alternate information source suggests that the Jews of Ivatzevichi were forced to march to Byten, rather than Casava, and in March rather than in February. They were grouped with Jews from nearby villages, totaling some 600 persons. They were required to leave all possessions at home and were only allowed to take what could be hand carried. Similar to the first story, it was very cold and people lost extremities to frostbite. After the Ivatzevichi Jews arrived, the Byten *Judenrat* tried to provide for them minimal necessities of life. They housed and fed them, and rendered medical first aid.¹³

Genocide

A trench was dug, ten meters long and five meters wide. Having been returned to Ivatzevichi, the inmates were counted. One of the German commanders favored Sarah’s father. He liked Bentzion’s practical qualities, rationality, and level-headedness. The German offered an escape but he would not go without his wife and daughter, while Sarah’s mother refused to go without her sisters and brothers. So they decided to perish together. Bentzion’s request was to be killed first. According to the testimony of Nina Lavrenchuk, standing at the edge of the ditch, Benzoin shouted: “We will be buried but death will find you too. Crows will pluck out your eyes.” The act of genocide was carried out on 11 August 1942, in the early morning. The Jews were stripped naked, placed on the edge of the trench, then shot with automatic weapons. Lithuanian volunteers of the Punitive Battalion SS and local Ukrainians participated in this action.

After the murder, the Germans and the police appropriated the clothing and remaining personal belongings of the executed Jews.

Altogether during the years of occupation in Ivatzevichi, the Nazis tortured to death, shot, and hanged 350 persons of all ethnic groups, including 290 Jews. In the winter of 1945, a Soviet Commission was only able to identify by name, fifty-six of those shot, and among them thirty-nine Jews, thirteen Belorussians, and four Poles.¹⁴ Among them were Sarah's parents, Benzoin and Miriam Kopeliansky; two of Miriam's sisters, Feiga Bassenson and Tzira Goralskaya; Miriam's brother Chaim Rozhanky, and his children.¹⁵

Retreating before the advance of the Red Army in the summer of 1944, the Germans burned down most of the houses in Ivatzevichi. They drove away to Germany for forced labor no less than a hundred Belorussians, Russians, and Poles. In the Ivatzevichi area, they burned down twenty-six villages: Bobrovichi, Borki, Viada, Zatishye, Zybaly, Krasnitza, Mikhalin, Omelnaya, Tupichitzy, Khodoki, among others. Five of these villages were never rebuilt.¹⁶ After the war, a monument, Guta-Mikhalin, was built over a mass grave, and a cemetery established for peaceful citizens, Soviet warriors, and partisans.¹⁷



Fig. 4 - The Guta-Mikhalin monument to WWII victims

Sarah's escape

Just prior to the Ivatzevichi massacre, Bylina, an old Polish woman whom the Kopelianskys often helped, came to them, offering to save Sarah. Neither Bylina nor her adult single daughters had ever spoken to Sarah. They were Church-goers and always prayed before going to bed. Miriam did not want to let her daughter go but Benzoin insisted. Sarah spent about five days with the Bylinas. During the day she would sit in the garden among the long climbing beanstalks and at night she would be allowed into the house. On the morning of 11 August 1942, lying on a straw mattress, she heard the shots that put an end to the lives

of her parents. The Ukrainian police station was near the house, while a German guard detail, on a high platform, kept round-the-clock watch over a sawmill nearby. Prior to harboring Sarah, Bylina had hidden a young physician from Warsaw named Beatiss. He was very popular for selflessly helping people in Ivatzevichi. Beatiss has arranged a rendezvous with partisans to join them. But the encounter was scheduled too late, the police came after the doctor, led by some of his former patients, and beat him to death with their sticks.

The partisans did not know that the doctor had perished. On market day, two contact women from the partisans appeared disguised as peasant women. Instead of finding the doctor, they found Sarah. In Ivatzevichi everyone knew Sarah by sight. In order to change her face, Bylina put a pea under her upper lip, tied a kerchief on her head, and attired her in a wide skirt with an embroidered village cover. She made Sarah rub her feet with ash. In this guise, Sarah departed. As she left, she saw Zeld Light, the baker's daughter, hiding in the outhouse. The girls' eyes met and Zeld waved to her in silence. Sarah looked no different from the village girls. She walked barefoot with a basket of empty bottles in her hand. Her escort kept their distance in order not to be exposed as rescuers of a Jewess. Passing



Fig. 5 - Sarah's parents, Benzoin and Miriam, 1912

houses, Sarah saw acquaintances that followed her with their gaze but did nothing to stop her.

Among the partisans

Sarah and her escorts made it safely to the village of Postaryn. After crossing a bridge over the stream Grivda, they were safe. The camp of the Shchors Partisan Command was located in the forest of Wolf's Lair. Because the Germans constantly hunted for the partisans, they were often forced to change location.

Sarah was accepted into the unit thanks to the reputation of her father, although the partisans had expected Dr.

Beatiss, not a sixteen-year-old girl. When she was brought from a villager's barn to the forest, she was surprised to see how close the camp was to Postaryn. Everything seemed unreal—a sunny August day, the sound of an accordion, bonfires surrounded by young people in quiet conversation.

The partisans asked Sarah what she could do. When they discovered that she had helped with packing medicines and knew a little about dosages, they assigned her to the medical section. She attended the wounded, fed them, bandaged them, and also carried out assignments in the kitchen. When Dr. Lubovich promised that the partisans would build a separate hut for Sarah, she naively asked where she could find sheets. Her naivete amused the partisans and her statement served for a long time as the butt of jokes. Among the partisans were people who had survived battles and prisons, some who had been in a Soviet jail or camp. They knew well how to find their way in the forest and stoically bore the privations of camp life. The partisans did not like being asked questions and were always on guard. When Sarah heard that the commanders were preparing to change camps and to march somewhere during winter, she became worried and inquired where exactly they were going. For this she received a categorical rebuke: “Why do you need to know where? Are you a spy?” They felt it was best to limit this information so that if someone was caught, they could not divulge the place.

Sarah's main treasure was photographs she had grabbed at the last moment. When she showed them to others, one person called her “bourgeois,” for the pictures showed well-dressed people.

The situation of women in the forest was peculiar. The simplest thing was to find a protector. An acquaintance from Casava introduced Sarah to partisan life, advising her to attach herself to a man, who would guarantee that nobody else bothered her. For Sarah this was unthinkable. She had only lost her parents a week earlier and could not take this course. She was quickly recognized as a “touch-me-not” and was left alone. Soon, her clothes became tattered and she learned to be content with little. Sometimes other girls helped, sharing what their boys had brought from their forays into villages.

Within a hairbreadth of death

The partisans kept the Germans always on their guard, and the occupiers sought to eliminate the partisans at every opportunity. They wanted to assure their own security and teach a lesson to the local inhabitants. Punitive actions followed in succession as Nazis imposed fines, deported Belorussian youths to forced labor in Germany, burned villages and shot hostages.

To avoid Nazi reprisals, the medical unit in which Sarah served received orders to separate from the main command and relocate to a more safe place. The wounded on stretchers, the doctor, the cook, and several young nurses remained in a swamp, covered by tall reeds. It was categorically forbidden to light bonfires or to speak aloud. The people received dry rations of bread, animal fat, and

Fig. 6 - Sarah's partisan certificate

ЛИЧНЫЙ ЛИСТОН
ПО ЧУЕТУ ПАРТИЗАНСКИХ НАДРОВ

Имя и отчество Копытская Ольга Леопольдовна

Место рождения Род. Цурков ст. 2. Луца

Пол Женщина 4. Социальное положение _____

Время поступления в ВКП(б) или ВЛКСМ, № партийного или комсомольского билета _____

Образование: общее и военное (что и когда окончил) Ж. К. С. В. школа 1944

Категория РВК и когда призван в Красную Армию Катег. _____

Участие на фронтах (где и когда) Катег. _____

Откуда, когда и с какой должности прибыл в партизанский отряд Из ст. Луца 17/8 44

Виды и в плену (где и когда) Катег. _____

В каких партизанских отрядах (или группах) состоял, занимаемая должность и район действия отряда:

1. с. " Славутика 1942 г. по 19/8 44 1944 г.
(район, ком. звания и т. д.)

отряд им. "Щорса" действовал в К. Вост. Сибирский
р-не Дальний области

2. с. " _____ " 1944 г. по " _____ " 1944 г.
(район, ком. звания и т. д.)

отряд им. _____ действовал в _____ области

3. с. " _____ " 1944 г. по " _____ " 1944 г.
(район, ком. звания и т. д.)

отряд им. _____ действовал в _____ области

Раны и контузы (гла и когда) Нет

13. Награды (ордена и медали) Нет

14. Семейное положение (состав и адрес семьи) В замужестве

М. Старик 1944 г. С. А. Камышова
(личная подпись)

15. Военная характеристика В отряде партизан в 1942 г. в партизанском отряде с 17/8 44 по 19/8 44. За время пребывания в отряде неоднократно участвовала в боях с немецкими захватчиками. Велась работа по организации и проведению работы по освобождению пленных, разведке и боям в лесном районе. Участвовала в освобождении захваченных немцами деревень и поселков. Работала в полевых условиях. Показала себя в работе по освобождению пленных, разведке и боях. Является членом отряда партизанского отряда. В отряде к Ирощанскому.

Командир партизанского отряда _____ Комиссар партизанского отряда _____

Подпись командира и комиссара отряда _____ (должность и звание)

onions. They remained thus for five days until they were returned to the main force.

On the third day Sarah and her friends heard a commotion coming from patch of dry land in the swamp—German voices and the clang of metal pots. They spent a sleepless night. In the morning, the physician discovered through his binoculars a group of Germans coming toward them. Everyone expected the worst. The cook covered himself with dirt and dived into the ooze. Sarah said goodbye to life and closed her eyes. A feeling of helplessness and terror froze her body. Miraculously, at the last instant, less than five meters from them the soldiers changed direction and headed away. Never again would Sarah be so close to death.

Anti-Semitism

The situation of Jews among the Belorussian partisans was peculiar. On the one hand, all had a common enemy. On the other hand, the Jews had no refuge but the forest in case of conflict. While Belorussians could rejoin their families in the village where they lived before joining the partisans, the Jews were only accepted on the condition that they part with their parents, wives, and children.

The 52nd group (company) of the Shchors Command, in which Sarah found herself, was mixed, but the 54th group consisted almost entirely of Jews. In April 1943 she was transferred into the independent Suvorov Detachment, which in June-August 1943 operated as part of the Ponomarenko Brigade.¹⁸

The anti-Semites in this detachment did not dare raise their heads. The Jews were armed, stuck together, and others were afraid to start up with them. Every night the Jewish youths went on a periodical assignment. They attacked German posts and patrols, mined railroads, inflicted ruinous damage, inspiring great fear in the enemy. Zhora Kremen, Sarah's former classmate, was a partisan. In one operation, he lost his beloved, who died in his arms from loss of blood.

Discipline was strict in the detachment. By verdict of the partisan tribunal they shot a brave fighter named Fedia who had raped a woman in a neighboring village. This reaction was necessary as the partisans depended on the villagers to supply them with food, clothing and intelligence data. Death was the punishment for violation of orders or loss of a weapon. They executed a Jewish youth whose rifle had imperceptibly slipped off his sled during a march. He had dozed only momentarily and paid for it with his life. He had been a diligent and capable young man, who Sarah thought looked like Woody Allen. His death made an indelible impression on Sarah. She remembered forever the terror in the face of the condemned as he was being led to execution. They also shot a young Jewish woman named Raya, when they caught her napping while guarding the dugout of the detachment commander. She dozed while the fire she was supposed to maintain threatened the dugout in which lay the gravely ill commander. No harm was done, but the woman who had failed in her duty was still shot. The executioner was a partisan with whom Raya had an

ephemeral tie. He was an actual criminal, who had escaped from jail with the arrival of the Germans, and later joined the partisans.

The situation for the Jews worsened when a man named Yegorov became the unit commander. During that time, the partisans had direct contact with the "mainland" and airplanes dropped in ammunition, provisions, and medicines. Later the airplanes began to land on improvised airfields built in forest clearings. The headquarters of the Belorussian partisan movement set the goal of gathering the forces of separate partisan detachments and groups for united action. Yegorov decided to transfer all those not directly involved in combat to a different place. Sarah found herself among those to be removed. Most of those designated to leave, besides a few older women, were Jews. They marched to a remote area. After a week of exile they brought the Jewish group back. Yegorov, summoned to Moscow, and died in a plane crash while enroute.

A clumsy favor

Long months of forest life and the constant stress of danger, blunted ones caution. Men were depressed by the absence of female companionship. They could not always withstand temptation. Sarah was appointed assistant to a new doctor named Blumovitz. Their task became to distribute manganese crystals to men infected with venereal diseases which they contracted in surrounding villages. Sarah colored their alcohol supply with manganese to prevent patients from being tempted to steal it.

Misha Diachkov was a former patient or Sarah who loved literature. They had read poems together and discussed the books that had both read. Returning from a mission, Misha was arrested. The rumor was that one of Diahckov's subordinates committed a gross violation of military discipline, which had consequences for Misha. He sent for Sarah from where he was confined. Since she had colored as her alcohol, Sarah begged a glass of alcohol from a cook. An hour later she was summoned to headquarters where she faced a grim faced group of officers.

The ranking officer asked her by what right she had supplied a drink to the accused prisoner. Standing for the menacing men in her miserable tatters, she pleaded that it was a hot summer day, that Misha was a former patient whom she trusted, and that she saw no harm in succoring him, when he had just returned from a mission. It turned out that after taking the alcohol, Misha drunkenly cursed a partisan commander. Sarah might well have been executed before the morrow had not an unnamed superior from the headquarters of the partisan movement been present, having arrived from Moscow for an inspection. The physician Blumovitz was ordered to relieve Sarah of work in the medical section. She was appointed to kitchen duty.

In the kitchen

The kitchen was a dishonorable place to serve the detachment. The only permanent worker was the cook, who was given temporary helpers from time to time. The

availability of foodstuffs depended upon the success of the supply detachment's acquisition sorties. Destitute peasants would rarely supply much. Sometimes they were lucky enough to capture a German supply convoy headed to Germany. On rare occasions the partisans' supplies were replenished by food concentrates from across the front line brought in through the air bridge, when planes landed to collect the wounded. Partisan meals usually consisted of potatoes, onions, cabbage, and other vegetables, all cooked in huge pots with enormous pieces of animal fat. The soup was filling and satisfying but it ruined Sarah's stomach for the rest of her life. In the end she was forced to feed herself roasted potatoes as she could no longer bear heavy meals.

From time to time the partisans would capture a prisoner they could interrogate, and then they remembered Sarah. An orderly from the commander or chief of staff would go to the kitchen and demand that the cook release the girl to serve as an interpreter. During one sortie they took prisoner a young Belgian soldier who had been recruited by the *Wehrmacht*. He was very frightened and was overjoyed when Sarah started speaking to him in French. The prisoner was fed and was offered cigarettes but was shot after the interrogation. Nor did they spare a young German whom they also treated well before executing him.

War's end

During the summer of 1944 the partisans inflicted irreparable losses on the enemy. In coordination with the general headquarters of the Soviet Army, they blew up in a single night many kilometers of railroads in the occupied territory. The night sky lit up like daylight with the explosions, but few people knew that this was a unified operation named "Rail War," planned in Moscow. It was the first event of the "Bagration" operation, which eventually led to the complete liberation of the territory that is now in Belarus.

After that night the Germans persistently attacked the partisans. Were it not for the Pripiat River, they would have all been in dire straits. The partisans crossed it under massive German artillery fire and air attacks. It is difficult to ascertain the numbers of killed and wounded at this crossing. On the opposite shore, the partisans who survived were welcomed by the Red Army. This happened on 11 August 1944, exactly two years from the day when Sarah's parents had been shot in Ivatzevichi.

A different life

In August 1944 the partisans regrouped in Homel. Sarah, among others, was honored with a medal, "Partisan of the Patriotic War." Upon completing an accelerated course, she became a medical nurse in a specialized hospital for extreme cases. All the physicians turned out to be Jews: Eva Abramova from Moscow and Ludmilla Markovna were especially concerned with Sarah's fate. A surgeon from Odessa cursed horribly. His deputy physician was also a Jewish woman. The hospital was in Poznan, Poland, when victory was announced.

The hospital was located in a barracks abandoned by German *Luftwaffe* pilots. It was well appointed and comfortable. There, for the first time since school, Sarah allowed herself to be courted by a young man. Victor Nemirovsky, a twenty-six-year-old air force captain, an aviation engineer from Odessa. Things were exciting with Victor as he recited Russian classics by heart and painted watercolors. When Sarah fell ill with jaundice and was hospitalized, Victor visited almost daily. Their relationship deepened.

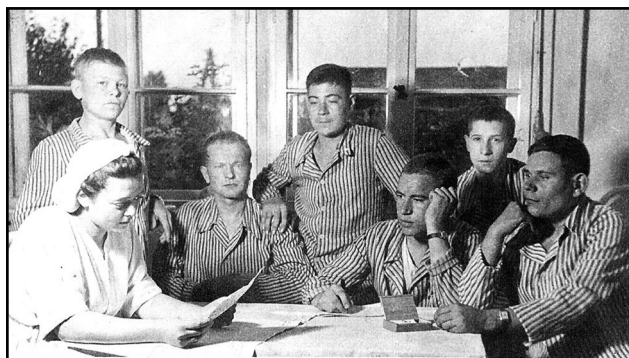


Fig. 7 - At the hospital in Poznań

Sarah recovered and they continued to meet often. Sarah's Jewish heritage did not concern Victor. He introduced her to the other members of his company. These were people full of optimism and cheerful plans for postwar life. Together they played the piano, told all kinds of funny stories, joked, danced, and watched films. Often they all gathered around Victor to listen to Chekhov's short stories and Pushkin's poems. Sarah was close to a marriage commitment with Victor and living in Russia, when the family intervened. Her relatives, Aunt Mania and her husband, and cousins Izy and Sioma, who had all returned from exile or evacuation, were convinced that to it would be impossible for a Jew to live comfortably in the Soviet Union. They were particularly concerned because Sarah was sincere and didn't hide her thoughts, which boded poorly for her safety.

After much deliberation, Sarah conceded to her relatives. At the age of twenty she had survived suffering, death, and loss of loved ones sufficient to fill several human lifetimes. With heavy heart, she sacrificed again, parting with Victor whom, by then, she had come to love.

Victor was not prepared to accept this breakup. He still felt that he could protect his beloved from misfortune. Still she ended the wonderful, pure, romantic relationship, seemingly full of hope for a happy future, free of death and separation. Deep down Sarah sensed that her heart mate could only be a Jew. Sarah was discharged and as a former Polish citizen, was left to go where she wished. She found relatives in Lodz and went to them.

Sarah lived with her uncle, a bookkeeper, and began looking for an occupation. Her fate was decided when she

met with a woman with whom she had served as a partisan. The old acquaintance worked in a home for Jewish orphans, who had survived the war in Catholic monasteries and Polish families. Their miraculous survival was due to the courage of benefactors who had accepted the children at the peril of their own lives and families.

This work was sponsored by a organization known under the neutral name "Coordination." Sarah began helping in the orphanage on Pietrowskego Street and became more and more absorbed in this work. They taught children to sing in Hebrew, cared for them as best they could. They received a small monetary allowance for each child. It was a difficult time. People were hungry and in need of necessities.

Meanwhile relatives sought a match for Sarah. Her aunt wanted to her to wed an engineer named Shatz. The man was much older and Sarah disliked him. Every time he visited, she jumped out the window and stood in the courtyard until he had left. After a short time the family set out for Palestine. Sarah was so absorbed in her work at "Coordination" that she decided to postpone emigration until later.

Working with the children, she met Adam Weisfelner. A year older than Sarah, he had likewise suffered through several concentration camps, including Langbilau, Annaberg, Blechhamer, and Wadenburg. Surviving only by a miracle, this handsome young fellow had a shy smile. Blond and without obvious Semitic traits, he often traveled to rural areas thanks to his "Polish" appearance, seeking Jewish children. Sarah and Adam worked together in an orphanage in the townlet of Petrollessye, Silesia.

Sarah and Adam left Poland in secret. They crossed the border to Czechoslovakia, to Austria, and to Germany. In Munich, Sarah worked two years in a Jewish women's organization. During that time she corresponded with a school friend from Slonim, Ada Gurvich, who was living in Australia. Ada arranged a sponsorship for Sarah and Adam. While the might have tried immigrating to Israel, the English were intercepting shiploads of illegal immigrants and detaining them in Cyprus.

Australia

Sarah and Adam were married and had a son Bob before departing for Australia, where they sought refuge from the hardship of war. The young couple arrived on 1 May 1949, after ten weeks of travel via the Panama Canal. It was a difficult beginning but they were happy and full of youthful vigor. Their first shelter in Australia was the "Belostok House" in Melbourne, where Sarah and her husband spent six weeks. Then they rented an apartment. Adam found work in General Motors plant making vehicle transmissions, while Sarah, with her knowledge of Hebrew, was appointed as a teacher in a Jewish kindergarten.

Adam and one of the kindergarten parents decided to open their own business. They invested \$500 in a small shop making women's clothing, for which there was demand. Additional help came unexpectedly. Adam sent his wife and little son to summer camp, where Sarah met a pre-war acquaintance of her father. Chaim Milstein used to visit

Ivatzevichi to buy timber. He fondly remembered Bentzion. With Milstein's financial support, Adam changed partners and increased production. He purchased the best equipment from Germany and learned knitting women's garments. Soon he employed hundreds of workers. Later, Adam sold the factory and bought a supermarket.

During that time, Adam's father, Moshe Weisfelner, managed to emigrate from Kazakhstan to Israel. Sarah's cousins did the same. Sarah had first visited Israel in 1957 to see her cousins Khoma Lechter, Izzy Landsberg, and Adam's father Moshe. Sarah and Adam visited for two months nearly every year.

Sarah continued her studies at Melbourne University. She studied art, English and Russian literature, the history of Britain, philosophy and contemporary trends in religion (1963-68). Languages came to her easily. To facility speaking Yiddish, Polish, Hebrew, and Russian; she added German, French and Italian. Sarah worked as a guide in Melbourne's art museum for twenty-seven years.

Her son Bob finished his university schooling in Melbourne and began working in film production. Over the years he became a successful producer, creating television documentaries and dramas on a variety of subjects. Most of his work was dedicated to social and political themes, which proved to be popular. His most current work is a documentary about aborigines. He has two sons and a granddaughter.

In 1954, their daughter Barbara was born in Melbourne. Barbara grew up, graduated from an arts course and traveled around the world, visiting America, England, and France, then got "stuck" in Israel. Jerusalem enchanted her with its beauty and its people. Her desire to go anywhere else ended. Barbara continues to live in Jerusalem. She already has four sons, ranging in age from eight to twenty-three.

Adam not only became a successful businessman but engaged widely in philanthropic activities. He believed that money should "work," rather than support idle freeloaders. He was a hard worker who sincerely believed that Jewish well-being must be created by Jewish hands. Adam contributed to a stipend at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, was a member of the Sponsoring Committee of the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, and supported Aliyah in Jerusalem. Twice he organized, at his own expense, summer camps for children from needy families, and participated in many other philanthropic activities. In the 1990s Adam fell gravely ill, an echo of the war. The time spent in the Nazi camps ruined his health. Seeking to perpetuate the name of her husband, Sarah contributed a substantial sum to Tel-Aviv University endowing three stipends for doctoral theses in Adam's memory.

In Lieu of an epilogue

Sarah is now over eighty. Watching this woman, with her attentive and kind expression, it is difficult to recognize her age or to believe that she is from an era that is by now legendary. Sarah is full of contagious vivaciousness. Children and grandchildren treat her with awe. In 1995 they

visited Ivatzevichi, to see with their own eyes the places where the family history started. The townlet has become a city with a population of 25,000, center of the Ivatzevichi District with a population of 70,000. But there are no more Jews. The only exception was Nina Lavrenchuk, who told them how the inmates of the ghetto had been shot, and how Benzoin and Miriam Kopeliansky perished. They weren't able to discover the fate of the Bylina or of her daughters, the Catholic family that had extended a life-saving hand to Sarah and to Zelda Leight, the daughter of the local baker.

Sarah remembers daily the events of wartime, and has yet to find answers to many questions. Whence on earth so much hatred and cruelty? What does it take to make one



Fig. 8 - Ivatzevichi in winter, 2006

person a killer and another a savior? What can be done to prevent the tragedy in her life being repeated in the life of another? Most probably we shall need to seek the answers in ourselves, and for this it is good to remember the past and its lessons.

Endnotes

1. In the third book of Judicial Acts of the *Lithuanian Record*, under May 26, 1519, there is a record of a deal between Nicholas Illinish and the Grodno Jews Isaac and Lazar for 500 "silver kopeks".
2. *Kosciusko. Andrej Thadeusz Bonaventura* (1746-1817) – leader of the liberation movement of the peoples of Poland, Belaruss and Lithuania, national hero of Poland and of the USA, honorary citizen of France. In 2004 Kosciusko's home in "Merechevshchina" was restored.
3. *Kalinovski, Kastus* (1834-1864), Belarus activist. He founded the revolutionary organization in Grodno, and led the revolt in Belaruss and in Lithuania; executed.
4. The Oginsky Canal was built in 1765-1775 by Mikhail Kasimirovich Oginsky, *Hetman* of the Grand-Duchy of Lithuania, poet and philanthropist. It remained navigable till the beginning of WWII.

5. This whole family was wiped out by the Germans when they occupied Slonim in 1941.
6. National Archive of the Belarus Republic, *fond* 861, *opis* 1, *delo* 3, list 53.
7. Record of places of compulsory detention of the civilian population in the occupied territory of the BSSR, 1941-1944 [Spravochnik o mestakh prinuditelnogo sodержania naselenia na occupirovannoy terriotrii BSSR], Minsk, 2001, p. 89.
8. State archive of the Russian Federation, *fond* 7021, *opis* 3, *delo* 19, list 4.
9. Yad Vashem Archives, M-41/1010, p. 17.
10. Author's archive. Letter of Sarah Weis (Kopeliansky) from Melbourne, May 10, 2006.
11. Yad Vashem Archives, M-41/1010, p. 18.
12. Author's archive. Letter of Sarah Weis (Kopeliansky), May 17, 2006.
13. Moshe Pitkovsky, "Asoy is Untgergegangen di Yiddishe Kehile in Biten," *Pinkas Biten: Der Oyfikum un Untergrang fun a Yiddisher Kehile* [The register of Byten: The Origins and Downfall of a Jewish Community], (Buenos Aires: Bitener Landslayt in Argentine, 1954), pp. 221-224.
14. "Acts of the Cooperative Commission of the USSR in the Ivatzevichi rural Soviet of Jan 20, 1945." State Archive of the Brest Oblast, collect. 514, file 1, case 321, p. 19.
15. Deposition from interview of Mrs. Sara Weis, nee Kopelanska, to Sara Shmer, Archive Museum of Beit Lohamei ha-Gettatot.
16. "Settlements of the Ivatzevichi region." Administrative-territorial record of Jan. 1, 2005: Materials of the editors of the newspaper Ivatzevitzki Vestnik, Ivatzevichi 2005.
17. *Pamiat Belaruss*, Book of the Republic, Minsk 1995, p. 71.
18. Partisanskiye formirovaniya Belorussii v gody Velikoy Otechestvennoy Voyny, 1941-1944 [Partisan Organizations of Belaruss in the years of the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1944]. Brief data concerning the organizational structure of partisan units, brigades (regiments), detachments (battalions) and concerning their personnel, Minsk 1983, p. 129.



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