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Introduction

BY ALLAN LEVINE

In 1944 and 1945 as the Second World War ended and the Soviet Union's Red Army liberated the cities and towns of Eastern Europe, approximately 25,000 Jews walked out of the forests of Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, the Ukraine and Russia. For three years or more, these men, women and children had miraculously survived, eluding Nazi hunts as well as Soviet, Polish and Ukrainian partisans, who also resisted the Nazis but cared little about the Jews' plight.

Some of these Jews had also joined Soviet partisan brigades, whose leaders were more favourable to them, and fought against the Nazis, in armed combat and through the sabotage of railway tracks and bridges. Some lived on the run, others built military-style camps. Many more Jews had escaped to the forests — during 1942 and 1943 there were likely 100,000 Jews seeking refuge — from the ghettos where the Nazis had imprisoned them. Most, however, were later killed. Survival in the woods was not impossible, but to do so meant confronting vicious enemies and coping with the ravages of nature.

One among this multitude who defied the overwhelming odds facing any Jew trying to stay alive during the dark days of the Second World War was Leon Kahn, then known as Leibke Kaganowicz. He was only sixteen years old at the end of June 1941, when the Nazis

invaded Soviet-occupied territory. Soon after they arrived in Leon's small town of Eisiskes or Ejszyszki, where Jews had resided for centuries alongside Christian Poles and Lithuanians. Until the Soviet occupation of the region in September 1939, the town located near Vilna (or Vilnius, as it is now called), had been part of Poland for nearly two decades.

Within a few months of the Nazi occupation, most of Eisiskes' three thousand Jews were dead, murdered by Nazi death squads with the able assistance of Lithuanian collaborators. From a distance, Leon and his younger brother Benjamin witnessed this gruesome slaughter, a memory, he writes, he "can never forget." Owing to the efforts of historian Yaffa Eliach, a child survivor of the town, hundreds of photographs of the Jews of Eisiskes, including ones of Leon and his parents and siblings, are displayed in a three-storey picture tower at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

The Kahn family had initially survived the first wave of killings by relocating to the ghetto in nearby Radun, but death soon engulfed that community as well. By this time, in mid-1942, Leon had heard rumours of Soviet partisans in the forests. Although his father Shael was sceptical, Leon eventually persuaded him that survival in the forest was the family's only option. Leon's mother Miriam refused to leave her own mother in the ghetto and both women eventually died. Leon's recollection of his farewell to his mother, whom he never saw again, is one of many poignant moments in his memoir.

During the next few months, he was able to link up with a Soviet partisan group, to be, as he writes, "one of the hunters instead of one of the hunted," and participated in many sabotage operations against the Nazis. But death was always around every corner. And in October 1943, he watched in horror as his father was shot and sixteen-year-old sister Freidke murdered by a group of Polish soldiers of the *Armia Krajowa* or Home Army, who regarded most Jewish fugitives as Communist sympathizers and a threat to an independent Poland. Freidke was bayoneted and died instantly, while Shael Kaganowicz lingered with his wounds for several days before he, too, died.

In general, Leon's survival, like that of many partisans, was dependent on a variety of factors. The first was geography, since one had to be close to the forest to reach it safely. The jungle-like forests of eastern Poland, Lithuania and Belarus, so thick in spots that during the day one cannot see the sunlight, provided adequate yet primitive shelter. Second was age, because it was difficult for those individuals who were more than forty years old and younger than fifteen to deal with the hardships and dangers of life as an escaped Jew from a ghetto. Third was access to weapons: the Soviet officers who waged a guerrilla war against the Nazis from behind enemy lines usually demanded that Jewish recruits to their brigades supply their own guns. It was a dangerous and almost impossible challenge to meet. Leon was able to acquire weapons from friendly farmers his father had done business with prior to the war.

Fourth was the attitude of the local rural population. Food and aid were always welcome, but helping a Jew under the Nazi occupation meant an instant death to the peasant and his family. Fear of Nazi retribution was endemic and naturally impacted on Jewish and Christian interactions. At the same time, anti-Semitism, widespread in Europe for generations, did not vanish during the war. Informing on Jewish fugitives for as little as a piece of sugar or salt was not unheard of. Fifth was the leadership and courage shown by such Jewish partisan leaders as Aba Kovner, Tuvia Bielski, Shalom Zorin, Dr. Yeheskel Atlas, Misha Gildenman and dozens more like them. Without their strength, perseverance, and determination in rescuing Jews from the ghettos, providing shelter for them once they reached the forests, negotiating with the Soviets, and protecting and feeding camps of families, thousands more Jews would have perished. Finally, there was sheer luck. As Leon's own saga shows over and over again, fate often intervened and being in the right place at the right time meant the difference between life and death.

The war and its hectic aftermath dictated a different set of morals and standards. Leon, like many partisan survivors, was young and understandably intent on avenging the murders of his family. He makes no apologies for stealing food or taking the law into his own hands. He was not perfect. He made mistakes, and often reacted

impetuously and not always, in hindsight, with the best judgment. But this grave time did not usually present moments for reflection. Hesitation meant death.

His relations with his Christian Polish and Russian neighbours and comrades were complex and not always easy to explain or understand. War brings out the best and worst in some people. Leon's tale is filled with episodes of hatred, revenge, greed, and murder, but he also recounts numerous acts of kindness, and writes of hope and optimism.

The history of the partisans is the least-known aspect of the Holocaust, although in recent years there have been several books published on the subject in addition to memoirs like Leon's that relate the experience in the forest from a personal perspective. Many historians dismiss as inconsequential the Jewish partisans' resistance — pointing, for example, to the small numbers of those who survived compared to the millions who perished — yet they fail to appreciate the immensity of the struggle. The question should not be, why did more Jews not resist, but rather, how, under the circumstances, was any resistance possible at all?

The answer can be found in Leon Kahn's memoir. The story he tells is one about ordinary people like himself whose lives were altered forever by a war that stained the history of civilization. His is a chronicle that testifies to the strength and fortitude of the human spirit. It is a tale that deserves to be told and told again.

Allan Levine is a historian and writer based in Winnipeg. He is the author of eight books including *Fugitives of the Forest: The Heroic Story of Jewish Resistance and Survival During the Second World War*, which won the 1999 Canadian Yad Vashem Prize for Holocaust History.

Prologue

There may be those of you who will question why I have written this book. Why I feel so compelled to tell my story to the world. Reliving the details has been a painful and heartbreaking experience for me. Memories that had faded with time once more assume a fresh reality, and I am torn with grief and anguish as I recall the sufferings of my lost family and friends. In spite of this, I am glad I persisted, and for several reasons. One is the hope that in the telling I may help to ensure against the possibility of a repetition of the past. Painful as it may be for all of us who survived, I believe it essential to remember and put down what happened to six million of our people. Innocent souls who died only because they were Jews.

In addition, I wished to show that the German nation alone was not totally responsible for the destruction. The Germans could never have succeeded as well as they did without the wholehearted support of many Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and thousands of other Jew-hating, pro-Nazi collaborators. Nurtured for two thousand years on the seeds of anti-Semitism fed to them by the Catholic Church and the educational system, they were more than willing to cooperate with the Germans in the liquidation of the towns and ghettos, in

the operation of the execution squads, and in the running of the death camps.

Lastly, I believe it is absolutely imperative to mention the responsibility of the Roman Catholic Church and its clergy for their part in the wholesale and unprecedented slaughter of Central Eastern European Jewry. They were well aware of the daily persecutions, the indignities, the murders, and indescribable horrors inflicted on Jews by their devout Catholic parishioners. Yet not once did Rome or any of its deputies throughout Eastern Europe raise a voice in protest. This shocking and complete disregard for the spilling of innocent Jewish blood indicated their tacit approval of what was happening. It will remain forever as a black and shameful chapter in the annals of Catholicism, which time can never erase.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Marjorie Morris for more than two years of hard work on the manuscript, Betty Keller for editing the material, and Cherie Smith for her support and encouragement.

— Leon Kahn