

[1.1] Commission for Compiling the Chronicle of the Great Patriotic War.

Stenogram of interview with Max Ovseevich Sankshtein

The interview is conducted by the researcher F.L. Yelovtsan and transcribed by Alexandra I. Shamshina

December 22, 1944, City of Brest¹

Born 1898. Jewish. Hairdresser.

I was living in Brest and was born here. The Germans beat the Jews all the time. The first week, they picked up 7,000 Jewish men. It isn't known where they disappeared to. They took them from buildings, off the street, everywhere. They caught me, too. It seemed to them that I wasn't a Jew. I said I'm a Pole. And there was an icon hanging in my place. [A German] took my passport, looked at it, and left. It said in my passport that I'm Jewish by nationality, but what does he know about passports? And it was a Soviet passport. He inspected every corner and left.

I worked at the corner of Pushkinskaya and Sovetskaya streets as a hairdresser. I walked around without a patch². At first, there were only white armbands.³ One day, a man came to our hair salon and wanted to kill me. I wasn't wearing an armband at that time. The owner started to plead with him, and he let me go. I started to work, but I had already put on an armband, although I covered it with my shirt sleeve. I worked like this all the time, and then left for Kobrin⁴ to work. I worked there for six months, came back, went to work at a women's hair salon. I was working all the time, going to the ghetto⁵ to sleep. There were already yellow patches at that time. I put on my patches and walked around town, got a pass. We walked in the middle of the street. An order was posted for Jews to walk in the middle of the street, in groups of at least 6 persons.

On October 14, 1942, a hairdresser, a good friend, a Pole, came to me and said, "Max, clear out today, the ghetto will be surrounded. They've already arrived for work here." My wife was Polish. She was even in the hair salon at that moment. I told her, "Run to my sister and tell her everything." She ran to my sister and told her. My sister didn't go to the ghetto that night and hid in her house as well. I had this one friend. He was a Ukrainian, and he says to me, "You know what, let's go to my place to sleep today, otherwise they'll catch you and kill you." I went to his place to sleep. I got up at around 7:30 – 8 am. I look, there's no one to be seen, no one was going to work. I thought – it's done⁶. I needed to cross the street. I lowered my cap, raised my collar, and went home via Komsomolskaya Street.

Someone said that I was running across the street and informed my [1.2] wife that Max had gone home. She flew home. I hid in a shed there. I lay there for 5 days. I saw others being killed in the middle of the road. Then, I said to my wife, "We'd better go to our room."

But for five days, I stayed in that room under lock and key for a year and didn't go out. Gestapo men lived across from me. They never opened this door. I was always sitting there under lock and key. My wife provided me with food. One day, the Germans came and wanted to take this room. I jumped into the closet. A pipe had been done up through the room to the kitchen, and I would hear everything. Here, I didn't even manage to hear what they were saying. A German, the custodian (a woman), and a man came in. They liked the room and demanded it be vacated tomorrow.

At that point, my wife said, "I'll put you under the bed." I said that it'd be better in the shed, I'll manage, it's better there. She said, "No, it's better under the bed."

I lay under the bed for 2 months. Then, the Germans took the entire apartment. I moved to Gorki Street 3. There was an old Russian woman I knew there. Her daughter let my wife have her room. She knew nothing about me. I was lying there almost all of this time. I didn't leave the room to go anywhere. When the town was bombed, I stayed in the room. One day, a piece of shrapnel came through the window and turned everything upside down. I was standing near the window. I'd just walked away, when it came flying in. All the time, I lay under the bed.

Before that, there was an audit, but somehow, I managed to hide under the bed.

After two weeks, I didn't have a place where I could lie, everything was busted up. My landlady said to me, "You know what, Max, it's warm now, go under the veranda." I lay there for 2 weeks. My brother-in-law's son even caught me, but he couldn't say anything because he was mute. He was pointing: grandmother, someone is sitting there. "Pipe down," his grandmother told him.

Then, I returned to this room. My landlady had already left. There remained a few Poles who didn't want to go beyond the Bug River.⁷ They had been in a large cellar for four days. About 15 people were there. I said to my wife, "No matter what, just get me in and on the floor." She went there and told them some such. I said that I would speak Polish, and so, I sat with them for 4 days, they gave me permission. There was a railway worker there. His family had left. He liked my wife, he gave me permission to stay. That's how I was rescued.

My wife would be asked where her husband was. She would say, "I don't know, he disappeared." One person said, "I saw your husband being led off." Another said, "Your husband was murdered." A third said, "Hanged."

Yuzef Lashch, a Belarusian, worked for me. He helped my wife.

I was here in the ghetto for only 5 months. They sent all of the Russians out of the ghetto and sent Jews there. There is another woman here. Her husband is Russian. She was also rescued this way.

I could only lie on my stomach. That way you wouldn't cough. [1.3] One day, guests showed up, and I couldn't make the slightest move over the course of 7 hours.

When I emerged, I weighed 42 kg, I was yellow, thin, pale. And I'd always had a good appetite.

My wife saved a lot of people. She saved 6 partisans, 2 Poles. She is 52 years old, but she does everything. My sister was caught and driven off. My brother was picked up the first week. 27,000 Jews were shot here.⁸ [1.4]

¹ Between the world wars, Brest (Polish: Brześć) was in Poland. Home to a Jewish population of more than 21,000, about half the population in 1931, this town lay at the intersection of Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Polish culture. During the German occupation, Brest made up a part of the Reich Commissariat Ukraine (RKU).

² Patch: a yellow patch in the form of the Star of David which Soviet Jews were forced to sew on the front and back of their clothes, so as to distinguish them from other people.

³ The white armbands were replaced by yellow patches throughout General Commissariat Volhynia-Podolia in September 1941, shortly after the transfer from military to civilian rule.

⁴ Kobrin (Polish: Kobryń) belonged to Poland before 1939 and was in the RKU under German occupation.

⁵ The ghetto in Brest was set up on December 16, 1941.

⁶ The ghetto of Brest and all of its inhabitants was destroyed between October 15-18, 1942. The Germans and their local collaborators also killed many Jews from outside the ghetto, wiping out practically Brest's entire Jewish population.

⁷ The Bug River formed much of the eastern border to that part of German-occupied Poland known as the General Government. A large number of Poles fled across the river as the Red Army drew closer in the spring and summer of 1944.

⁸ The entry for Brest in *The USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos* suggests the number of victims of the Holocaust in Brest was little less than 22,000: 4,000 men (July 6, 1941) and 16,000 (October 15, 1942) – plus another 8-10 percent due to hunger, exhaustion, beatings, exposure, individual killings, etc.