

**Translation: Galyna Lavrova**

Transcript of conversation with Solomon Pekker

The interview was conducted by the scientific secretary of the Commission A.A. Belkin.

Transcribed by Roslyakova

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Solomon Abramovich Pekker

Born in 1884, Jew, native of the city of Radomyshl, Kiev region. I have lived in Kiev since 1917. Non-partisan. Before the war, I was the senior manager of houses in the Leninsky district. Now I am the senior manager in the same area.

I could not leave Kiev, because I was among those employees of the City Council who had important tasks in terms of protecting the city. Our elite lived in the house where I was the manager: Spivak, the 3rd secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine, Shomrilo, the city committee secretary of the party, Popov, his deputy and simultaneously the head of the local air defense organization, and others. I was told that until the last moment I had no right to leave the city and would leave with these people.

On September 16 it was calm. On September 17 it became alarming – the Germans surrounded the city. On the 18th the city was already surrounded. We decided to break through. Detachments of the local defense of the city, representatives of the NKVD [The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs] gathered. We were not in a good, elated mood. The leaders were also in low spirits. We failed to break through, we were driven into a swamp. Hundreds of thousands of people died. Whoever could break out of the encirclement broke through.

A whole group of people and I decided to go back to Kiev. There was a certain Brodtkin, a pharmacist, and Zhitomirsky with me. There were also people with us whose last names I do not know. We headed back to Kiev. We came to Kiev on September 22. The Germans were already in the city.

I had no idea that the Germans would turn out to be such barbarians. I was boldly walking through the city and boldly went to my house. I was looking for my wife in apartment 1, where I left her, and I left her because I thought that it would be difficult for her to leave with us. There were Germans in apartment 1. I found her in another apartment of the house with no belongings, no furniture. Everything was robbed, everything was shattered. It was evident that the situation was grim.

No sooner had I sat down and change my clothes, than the gendarmes came to this house. I was not scared as I did not know that they were such barbarians. My wife said, "Get out of here, hide. They will take you." I disappeared.

When they came to our apartment, they first of all asked, "Are there any communists here?" My wife answered them, "There are no communists here." ~~At our place~~ *They suspected, assumed that* Shamrilo and Popov were in the apartment at that time, *since before the occupation I was with them all the time.* The gendarmes left. An hour later they sent another person here. When we saw that the situation looked bad, we went through the back door into the furnace room. We stayed overnight in this basement. My wife brought us some food.

On September 23, we came to the apartment again. I decided to change, because I was all covered in mud, naked and barefoot, I left my shoes in that swamp. As soon as I entered the apartment, the Germans came again. I managed to jump out through the window and hide.

Exactly at twelve o'clock in the afternoon, there was an explosion at the corner of Proriznaya street. The Germans began to bustle, everybody panicked a lot. They started catching people, arresting whole groups of Jews only.

My wife told me, "Solomon, it looks bad, we need to get out of here."

But where to go? In a rush, we did not figure out where we could go. ~~The Jews were taken away, given a shovel in their hands and buried alive.~~

Olga Romanovna said, "Let's go wherever our feet take us. We will die here anyway."

On this day, the Germans were catching Jews *and, taking them out of the city, forced* them to dig their own graves. Many were buried alive.

Even if I didn't see it, she [my wife] saw it, if I didn't hear it, then she heard. She and I are a whole.

There was a worker who said that there were three Jewish communists in this apartment. My wife's friend who was here warned us about it.

We went to 32, Prozorovskaya street, apt. 22. There we were sheltered for a few days.

On September 28, in the afternoon, her friend came and said that an order had been posted around the city, in which all Jews, regardless of age, were ordered to appear on Degtyarevskaya Street.

When such an order appeared, Olga Romanovna's friend said, "Take Solomon away, I am afraid to keep him."

We had to take action. She instantly went to Svyatoshino to her acquaintance. She gave him some money so that he would shelter us. He agreed, "Okay, bring them in, I'll hide them." He lived in a separate house in the forest.

At 6 p.m. on September 28, we set off to Svyatoshino when it was getting dark. ~~She received a pass through various ordeals.~~ The Germans were already darting about along the roads, the police were darting around, we barely made it to Svyatoshino. Patrols on the road did not let us through, they pushed us back. My wife wasn't stupid, she contrived. We were allowed to pass through the checkpoints.

We came to Svyatoshino, it was already dark. Mukhortovsky, her ex-husband's brother, lived here. She hoped that since he was her husband's brother, he would agree.

When we arrived, she knocked on the door. It was already late at night. He flatly refused to let us in. *She* begged on her knees to let us spend the night there. He rejected.

Where could we go? There was nowhere to go, nowhere to spend the night but in the forest. *We ended up spending the night in the forest.*

She went around several places where we could be hidden. Of course, she found this place – this was her ex-mother-in-law's place. She was a God-fearing old lady. She said, "I want to save the person. Please let them come."

~~We spent the night there.~~ We lay there for several days in the cellar. Olga Romanovna went to the city to find an apartment where we could hide. Everyone in Svyatoshino knew that she had not come in vain. If she came, then she must have brought someone with her.

She went to the city and there she found apartment 43 on Krasnoarmeyskaya Street. When she found an apartment, she came back to Svyatoshino and took us there. It was pointless to take all three of us to one apartment. *She took Zhitomirsky and Braukin* to her ex-husband's apartment, i.e. apartment 8, 71, Korolenko Street.

Hardly had we entered this apartment when the manager of the house Karpenko already gave us away. He was going to make a search to find out who was in her apartment. She told him, "I do not trust you, I only trust the German gendarmes." He agreed to go for the gendarme. We took advantage of this: we went through the back door to the attic. We stayed in the attic for two days. After that, she told me to go to the Baikovoe cemetery, then to Svyatoshino.

Before going to Svyatoshino, we were at the Baikovoe cemetery. There are crypts of rich people there. We hid in these crypts. In total, thirty people were hiding at the cemetery. At night they used to come out like shadows. At night we got together and discussed what to do. During the day we stayed in crypts. People brought us food. There was a watchman who received money for this, he was an old man, Russian, a decent person. He already knew the people, took food from them and passed it on to us. Everyone who was there had some relatives.

But then frost fell on. It became difficult to live at this cemetery. From the cemetery we moved to Svyatoshino. There I lived for two weeks with that very old woman. We stayed in the cellar all the time.

After Svyatoshino, as I have already told you, Olga Romanovna found an apartment. We were locked up there for a while. She went to work and locked the apartment. Everyone knew that she was the only one living in this apartment. At that time no one paid attention to these apartments yet. If there had been no provocators, we could have stayed there for a long time, because the Germans did not go from door to door. Some agent provocateur would point to an apartment and everything would be lost.

\*After a while, a very important event happened. I had had a chauffeur who had worked for me for five years. I hoped that if a person had worked for me for five years, with whom I had become friends, he would probably help me.

I said, "Olyusya [Olga], if you see Petka [Peter], tell him that I am here, maybe he will help us, maybe he will transfer us from Kiev."

She met with him and told him to come, that I was inviting him.

When he arrived, I walked out of my corner. I had a corner behind the sideboard, behind the cupboard or behind the mirror. There was a niche behind the sideboard under the window.

I went out to him and confessed. Although I had a big beard, he recognized me.

Instead of getting help from him, he, on the contrary, betrayed me to the Gestapo. He said there that communists and Jews were gathering in such and such an apartment\*

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A policeman who had worked for me as a loader, a Ukrainian, came and said, "Olga Romanovna, ~~Petka visited me and said, there was a denunciation~~ that Solomon Abramovich and others were hiding here."

His brother was the police chief and he was a policeman, both of them were Ukrainians. He came and warned us. Indeed, two days later they came with a search. I had to find a way out again, I had to look for other means in order to hide. Olga Romanovna found an apartment outside the city.

This woman had so much energy, so much willpower, so much intelligence! I am not saying this because she is my wife. She is so kind and nice. I have not seen anyone as energetic as this little woman. She cared a lot not only for me, but also for all the suffering ones.

After that we moved to 3, Peschanyi Lane to Vladimir Akimovich Popov, who was a Muscovite, a very decent person, a homeowner, a manager of a fur store.

In the meantime, she got acquainted with the workers of the underground organization, because she had to live from something. It would be suspicious if she didn't work. She went to work in an artel [a cooperative association]: she filled boxes with powder. She worked almost round the clock. At night she brought food, and she had to carry it to different places. She had to saw firewood and also carry it to different places. Such a small woman carried two, ~~three~~ poods [a pood is a unit of mass approximately equal to 16.38 kg].

Our underground work started in this apartment. She contacted a certain Dimitri Lisovets. Petr Chetvertyakov was in this organization. They trusted us and we started working. They brought us a radio.

Lisovets was the dean of the Pedagogical Institute in Nizhyn, he was in some elective position in the city party committee, he was shot later.

When we got the radio, things got better. We received information from Moscow.

This was in ~~April~~ May, 1942. Peschanyi lane is near the railway, it's a remote place, the yard was desolate. It was hard to imagine that someone was hiding here. The hut was small, the doors were not noticeable, somewhere in the back. There was a small garden near the house. There was a bed, a table and a chair in the room. The radio was

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\* Text from \* to \* is struck through.

kept in the sideboard. This very Chetvertyakov arranged to get us here. During all hours, the programs of the Sovinformburo were recorded and distributed through my wife.

It is difficult to express our state of mind when we heard the first sounds from Moscow. We were sitting there and crying. That was the first summary at 12 a.m. before "The Internationale" [the former anthem of the USSR].

On the radio we heard, "Moscow is speaking ..." We started crying. There were three of us: Brodtkin, Zhitomirsky and me. We heard a radio program from Moscow that the Red Army was allegedly advancing towards us. It seemed to us that Moscow [army] was moving towards us and would save us. The first summary was about Voronezh. Among other things, at some point of the summary it was said about the defeat.

We got in a terrible mood. I said, "We are done. We were awaiting help so much. It's better to commit suicide."

When she came the next day, we said, "Olyusya [Olga], we're having a very hard time. Our situation is terrible, we're struggling."

She could keep the spirit in us with her will power. She started scolding us, as it should be, she said, "You are losing heart."

We had to reconcile ourselves to this situation. Further on, the radio summaries became better. We listened to "The Internationale", listened to music. For some time we couldn't hear any broadcasts at all. Then we regularly started listening to summaries from the Information Bureau in the morning, afternoon and evening.

Chetvertyakov brought a rubber printing device. We started writing leaflets. We printed 150 leaflets at a time. These were appeals to people, "It won't be long before Ukraine becomes free." When they started taking people to Germany, we wrote, "Do not go to Germany, because people are dying there." Our task was to print these leaflets and pass them through Olga Romanovna to Lisovets.

Then we started giving all sorts of documents, certificates, birth certificates. We issued certificates stating that such and such was born in such a place. A birth record from the parish church was attached. We issued certificates stating that somebody was convicted for counter-revolution activity and anti-Semitism. Such certificates were issued especially to Jews. We had all sorts of seals, both police and church ones, we had forms from the house management, forms from German institutions, forms for Volksdeutsche.

We produced stamps for documents and certificates. Pyotr Chetvertyakov came and said, "Make five certificates for me." He gave names: Ivan Petrovich Sidorov, etc. We made the certificates for him the next day. Olga Romanovna knew a house manager in the city, a communist, who gave her certificates. There was a Komsomol member who gave certificates for bread cards. Every Jew was given a bread card, *because* sometimes they were checked on the streets on whether they had bread cards. We had people who got hold of bread cards. It happened that Olga Romanovna did not come to us for three or four days, if she had not completed the task given by Chetvertyakov.

We stayed in that place until September 1942. Then Chetvertyakov came and said that we had to get out of there.

I started working in a different way.

I had a big gray beard like Karl Marx had. Before the war I was not gray-haired, and during these events I turned gray. My hair was long, like priest's hair, I was wearing black glasses, carried a staff. I wore a peasant's overcoat, like the one monks wear, I wore torn boots.

I took the Bible and went to the market with a stick little by little. I sat down near some booth where people were likely to gather. I sat down, opened my Bible and started reading. The audience gathered around me. I read anything randomly. It was not important for me what to read, it was important for me to be seen reading the Bible. When people gathered, I started reading the prayers: "Lord's prayer", "I believe in one God", "Ten Commandments". I read and crossed myself.

When the audience gathered around me, I started saying, "Good people, what is happening in this world because you stopped believing in God. You can't escape from God. Fathers and mothers, from the fact that you allow the enemy to shed our blood, from the fact that you do not pity the poor, the unfortunate, or the crippled, from the fact that you let the innocent be torn to pieces, God will become angrier and angrier. The person who sheds the blood of the innocent perishes."

When I was reading, our people were walking beside me. In case of danger, there was a signal – to cough. When I heard a cough, I stopped talking about it, started talking about something else. When I saw that there were no policemen around, I started my songs again, "The day of reckoning with those who shed human blood is near, the day of liberation from those people who shed our blood is near..."

People gave me some eggs, bread – you name it. I used to bring home about two hundred in cash, some eggs, bread and so on.

Mostly old men and women were gathering. Sighs were heard. I was crossing myself and they were crossing themselves. I saw that they were sympathizing a lot. Especially great success was on the days before the holidays. I brought sixty eggs home at Easter. I felt satisfied that I could enter the crowd and tell people what was being done and make the crowd sympathize. Then I came to my hovel and stayed there until next Sunday.

I got caught three times. Once I wasn't careful. When I was reading, I mentioned the Soviet government, that "the only government that God is not angry with is the Soviet government." I said so. After that, a young man of about twenty-five, decently dressed, came up to me and said, "Old man, come here!" He led me out of the crowd. He said, "Show me your documents." I said, "Only God can check my documents, not you, you are a civilian. Here are my documents", I pointed to the Bible. He said, "What monastery are you from or are you just a communist?" I replied, "My only document is a book of God." He insisted, "No, show me your documents!"

I started puttering around. I took out my passport. In my passport it was written that I was born in 1875. He said, "Show it to me."

He looked at it. I had a pretty good passport. According to my passport, I was Vasily Konstantinovich Ivanenko. He asked, "What about other documents?" I said, "I also have a birth certificate." He said, "Show it."

I did. I deliberately pulled out a paper that I had been convicted for anti-Semitism. When I gave him my birth certificate, this paper fell out of the certificate. He grabbed this paper. He read, "In such and such a year Vasily Konstantinovich Ivanenko was sentenced by the Sevastopol military court to five years for agitation against the Soviet regime and for anti-Semitism."

He asked me, "Have you been convicted?" I said, "I have. The atheists who did not believe in God punished me. We, saints, were judged." He asked, "What for?" I said, "For the truth." He replied, "Come on, take off your glasses. Let's go to the district." I said, "Ok, let's go, but you won't beat me, right? Because you beat people." He said, "We will not beat you."

He took me along Shelyavskaya street to the police. An investigator was there, he checked my documents. They let me go. There were three such cases. Once they threw me down the stairs, but they did not beat me. The elderly were treated more or less indulgently. In addition, I always carried a Bible with me, always tried to make the cross fall out as if by accident, I always had an icon on hand. I got away more or less well.

When he read this note, he said, "Go, old man, since you don't like Judes, go home."

At that time, I suffered especially much, because the whole burden fell on her, *on Olga R.* She had to feed, save, protect.

There was such a case. When we started printing leaflets, I got an assignment to distribute these leaflets at the market. I went to the Jewish market, sat down near the chapel like a beggar, scattered these leaflets around me and left. The wind arose, and these leaflets were scattered around the market. People were picking them up. When there were good summaries from the Information Bureau, we also scattered them.

After a while, we were told that our house was being watched. Instantly we took everything out from there. We had to look for another place. A few days later our "manager" came and told that she had found a small house in the garden at the other end of the city. We signed a lease with the owner. We were transferred there. We carried a receiver, a typewriter and a printing device there. We carried them piece by piece. The inside of the receiver was put into a basket, a box was carried separately. In the evening I put the basket on my shoulders and carried it over. Firstly we made an underground hideout. There we felt safe and sound. This house was located on 50, Kozachaya street. The Gestapo searched for this underground hideout several times. We were watched closely. They came twice with a dog, but found no one.

Chetvertyakov brought us weapons. Zhitomirsky and I had revolvers, Brodskin had a Browning, but he just didn't have cartridges *for it*. If the Germans had found us, of course, we would have shot at them. Besides, everyone had poison. In order not to be tortured, it was decided to take the poison. We had morphine, we carried it in a small box.

It was better when we lived in the underground hideout. During the day, one person always stood at the window and watched, the rest went about their business: printed, wrote documents and certificates. When the radio transmission was being received, none of us was working.

There was a garden and a vegetable garden near the house. We could go outside at night. I went outside during the day too. I would take a knapsack on my shoulders and a stick and would go along.

~~The Nekrasovs lived next to us. The Nekrasovs asked, "Vasily Konstantinovich, what nationality is Olga Romanovna?" I said, "I guess she is Russian. I fled from Dnepropetrovsk, she gave me shelter, she is feeding me." Despite the fact that she was my wife, I slept in the closet. She called me "grandfather Vasily". The Nekrasovs called me like that too.~~

Our garden looked out onto a vacant ground. The partisans who came either with a report or for weapons walked through our house.

During the time that we lived on Kazachaya Street, we did not have a single accident.

Chetvertyakov was killed when he went on a mission. Lisovets was caught, he poisoned himself.

When we saw that the Red Army was coming to Kiev to help, Brodkin and Zhitomirsky decided to join the partisans. They took their weapons with them. They went to Vinnitsa. When Vinnitsa is taken, they will probably come. I stayed in Kiev. At my age, I would not have reached Vinnitsa, so we decided that they would leave, and I would stay here. Brodkin, Zhitomirsky and three more Russian guys – Kostya, a guy, whom we called Zhuchok, he was one of prisoners, and the third one, Ignatenko, - left.

The Germans started to move around. Our troops came closer.

In order not to put any suspicion on our house, I said to Olga Romanovna, "We need to take tenants." She took Nekrasova, who knew German well. In addition, there was a professor who also knew German. They moved in, the population did not pay so much attention. I could freely walk along the streets and read sermons. I had long hair, and I gave the impression of being either a monk or an old priest. Everyone took me for a priest, especially the women. I had conversations with the surrounding people.

The Germans and the police started walking around the apartments and in each apartment they warned that the next day we should clear out of the place. They used to force people move from the city center to the outskirts, organized military zones. This was in September 1943. Many people left for Demeevka. When the Germans forced out the entire population, they started robbing, took everything out of the apartments in trucks. Then they started forcing people out from Demeevka. They went from apartment to apartment with whips, drove people to the railroad station, and from the station to Vinnitsa. Then they started going around villages. They set up barrage detachments and did not allow people into the villages. Then the Germans said that they would blow up the area along with the houses.



We decided to go to the village and preach there what was needed. I took a stick in my hands again, ~~she~~ *Olga Romanovna* looked like a peasant. As soon as we stopped, I started reading the Gospel, all sorts of sayings. Then the people already treated it differently. They opened their mouths in surprise when I spoke about the Soviet regime.

The Germans disappeared at that time. There was no police. At that time my sermons influenced people a lot. I talked about the Soviet regime, about Moscow. Our victories had lately been huge. All these reports hit all the right buttons. I talked about Kharkov, about Kursk.

Little by little we got to the Khotov village – Olga Romanovna, I, Stakhovsky with his wife, the former was the owner of the artel where she worked. We stopped to spend the night. From there we went to Krugliki, where we decided to stay. We buried ourselves in the straw, ate only potatoes. We decided – come what may. Every day we expected death, every day we expected the Germans to come and shoot us. So we waited till the moment when a woman came and said, “The Germans are retreating!” We certainly couldn’t believe it. We looked – they were really retreating. On September 4 5, they said that the Bolsheviks were in Podil and they were advancing here.

Is it even possible to convey what we experienced when we learned that the Bolsheviks were advancing here? We were afraid of only one thing that we would be shot half a meter from freedom. When the Germans left, they threw grenades into cellars and blew them up.

One day we saw that shells were flying from the other side. The shells landed near our pit. The firefight lasted three or four hours. It was on November 6th. Kiev had already been taken.

Olga Romanovna was like a scout for us, she was the most reckless woman. She ran towards us, opened the door to the underground hideout and shouted, “Soviet tank!” We all froze. I wanted to rush to the Soviet tanks, but tears came and I burst into tears.

When we realized that we had been liberated, I said, “You know what, Olyusya, let’s go to Kiev. If God has saved us so far, he will continue saving us.” I was the first Jew to enter Kiev. On November 7, I was in Kiev.

I saw Khrushchov with my own eyes on November 8th. He was wearing a military uniform, examining the city. I had a beard. I wanted to come up to Nikita Sergeevich and say, “I am the first Jew in the city.”

It’s hard for you to imagine what it means that a person has the right to live. I was so proud to go to my Khreshchatyk, which was completely destroyed. I was walking down the street, the Soviet sky was above me, I was breathing the Soviet air, no one would touch me, I didn’t have to look back any more, it was freedom!

When I was sitting at the market, I saw the most terrible things. Ukrainians and Russians were kept at bay. The Germans walked like rulers with whips. They took whatever they liked. They would take things from a basket, from the stall, they did not shy away from anything.

There was a time when people were caught and sent to work: old men, old and young women, they were put into trucks like dogs. They would stuff a full truck with people and take them to Germany or elsewhere.

There was such a case. An old man was standing and selling things. A policeman approached him and said, "Oh, you bastard!" He called the old man a communist and hit him in the face with a whip. The old man picked up his things and left. The policemen were especially horrible. They plundered more than the Germans and beat people more. They killed their own brothers.

Lisovets headed our organization.

Of course, we needed money, because we had to live on something, we had to get weapons, we had to buy documents. In addition, some prisoners came and they were poorly dressed and barefoot. We had to wash them, clean them, dress them somehow. During this time, ~~two hundred~~ *up to one hundred* people passed through us. A prisoner would come, stay for two or three days, get some food, get better, receive documents from us and leave. For the most part, they came with a note from Chetvertyakov, or Lisovets said, "Today such-and-such will come, tomorrow such-and-such will come", or he brought people with him.

Once a friend of Lisovets', Sergei Beletsky, came to him and said that we had been sent some money from the Party Central Committee, and he was demanding that some of us come to get this money. To prove that there was money, he gave us seven thousand. We didn't believe him, especially Olga Romanovna insisted, "You don't have to go, Mitya. If they sent money, let them take it back." She *Olga Romanovna* agreed to meet with him the next day at the corner of ~~Saksaganskiy street~~ *Kuznechnaya street* and Zhelyanskaya street. That day he did not come, on the second day he did not come and on the third day he did not come.

Lisovets had a wife who was a doctor in Nizhyn. She was shot. He poisoned himself.

There was also Ivan Filippovich Kocherga. He has an order for this cause. He told us that Lisovets and Beletsky had got into the Gestapo. On the way to the Gestapo, Lisovets took poison. Beletsky was shot, but he did not betray anybody.

Chetvertyakov was shot one or two days before the arrival of the Red Army. He was lying dead in the street. There were five bullets in him. He was lying tied up.

I came to Kyiv on November 7. I got a job and I have been working tirelessly to this day. I took over a very difficult section of work, but my section is doing better than other sections. The Party and Soviet organizations trust me a lot. They give me all sorts of difficult tasks. Now I'm much more strained than before the war.