

KDRG YVA-048

Testimony of Mendel Brimer, born in Lanowce, Poland, 1920, Regarding His Experiences in Labor Battalions in Rostov and Detention in Maykop

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Translated from Yiddish by Theodore Steinberg

Edited by Ellen Garshick, March 2025

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Review

Mendel Brimer was born in Lanovtsy in Volhynia. In his youth he was a member of the local Zionist Youth).

When the Germans approached Lanovtsy at the end of June 1941, he succeeded in evacuating on the last train out. He went to Kavkaz and worked there until the end of December on a kolkhoz. Later he was mobilized into a military work battalion largely made up of Romanian and Polish Jews. Their work consisted of digging trenches against tanks, one and a half kilometers from the front.

In summer 1942, when the Germans began a great offensive on the Kavkaz front, his battalion was destroyed and he was one of the few who avoided death. He was transferred to Ordzhonikidze [Armashivka] and worked as a porter in a military warehouse until the end of the war.

In 1946, he applied to go to Poland. Thanks to an informant, he was arrested and he received a “child’s” punishment—2 years in jail.

As a prisoner, he found himself in Maykop, where he worked at crushing rocks and digging. After he was freed in 1948, he settled in Bratslav, where there were a few Jews. The whole time he tried to get to Poland, but he did not succeed.

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In 1950, he married Lize Mendelman, who was an engineer. Together with his wife, he went to Stalino in the Donbas. There he worked as an agent for photographic equipment.

In 1957, exercising his right to repatriation, he, with his wife and two children, went to Poland and lived in Walbrzych. In 1960, he and his family came to Israel. His wife works in a laboratory in the Health Ministry. He works for the Dan bus company.

Observations

Mendel Brimer briefly related his experiences during World War II, saying that he had nothing especially interesting to tell. But the truth is that for incomprehensible reasons, he

avoided describing parts of his difficult experiences in the military work battalion and when he was arrested.

It is known that in the work battalion the Soviets concentrated only descendants from the western parts of White Russia, Ukraine, and Poland, that is, “Westerners,” mostly Jews. Many of these “Westerners” died from bad conditions and hard labor, or they were invalidated. About this chapter—the work battalions in Russia, about which the survivors tell terrible things—Brimer could find no words to express the truth. There is great doubt about whether Brimer was in a special voluntary cap, too, during his two years under arrest, and one can easily doubt whether “he had no honey to taste there.”

It is also known that upon release from prison, people in Russia had to sign a commitment not to tell about living conditions in the camp or the interrogation methods of the NKVD, and so on.

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There can be no doubt that Brimer, too, had to make such a commitment, and even now he is afraid to “speak out of school” and cannot really free himself of the tension that follows many residents of Russia, as well as those who find themselves far from its borders.

Y. Alperovits

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Names mentioned in the testimony:

Lize Mendelman

Tsvi Mahal

Yosel Torber

Places mentioned in the testimony:

Lanovtsy, Kremenets district

Legnica

Walbrzych

Chutor Ruski, Stawropolski Krai

Armawir

Ordzhonikidze

Maykop

Moscow

Stalino

Bratslav

Kiev

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Recorded Testimony

Testimony of Mr. Mendel Brimer on his life in the Red Army and during World War II

I was born in Lanovtsy. We were two brothers and four sisters. My sisters were killed along with my father and my mother when the Germans shot the Jews of the whole town when the ghetto was liquidated. My father was a beer wholesaler. I studied in a cheder. I graduated from the Pavshechne School. After graduation I helped my father.

Jewish Life in Lanovtsy before World War II

Question: Describe Jewish life in the town.

—Lanovtsy was a very nice town. The whole town leaned toward Zionism. It had all the Zionist organizations: Pioneer, Zionist Youth. There was a big Jewish library. There was no gymnasium in the town. Boys learned in cheder and girls, in the Pavshechne School. There were also private Hebrew teachers who gave lessons. There was a large synagogue in town, a house of study, and two small study halls. There was a rabbi and there was a rebbe. The Trisk rabbi and other rabbis from the area would come to us. There were about 500 Jewish families in the town—craftsmen and merchants.

When the Russians first came, people were afraid, but after they settled in, people found work.

Question: To what organizations did you belong?

—To Zionist Youth.

Question: When the war broke out, what happened to you in the town? How did the Jewish population react?

—Some people were frightened, while many felt that the Germans would not do anything and people could live in peace.

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The Germans came to us on August 1 at night. Only a few families had left, mostly young people. We young ones decided to go, to evacuate, never mind that we were not members of the Communist organization. At the last minute, my father and mother chose not to go with me. They wanted me to stay with them. My older sister went to my father (we were sitting at the table before my departure) and said to him, “Don’t take on the fate of your child.” Perhaps a minute passed, and then he fell upon me, blessed me, and said, “Go, and God be with you.” Then I left, alone. My brother had gone as a pioneer to Israel in 1934.

I Leave Lanovtsy before the Germans March In

I left the town at one in the afternoon. Others had left at six in the morning. I saw how the Germans had aimed two bombs at the city. One bomb, at the train station, caused a fire. When I came to my friend so that he would come with me, his mother was opposed to it, so he stayed. I went alone. A lot of people thought I was crazy. But I went. At about nine, I met up with the group who had left at six in the morning. As a group, we went from town to town until we arrived at Kavkaz.

On the way, we spent dreadful nights. The Germans bombed us, and many were killed.

I Am Mobilized into a Work Battalion

We got to Kavkaz, Stavropolski Krai, Chutor Russia. We were organized into a kolkhoz [collective farm], where we worked. We worked for the Abaratshni Company, and on December 20, 1941, we were mobilized and sent to Rabatshni Battalion 85, near Rostov, and there we worked at digging trenches against tanks. We were one and a half kilometers from the front.

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There were many people in the battalion, about 1,500, Jewish, Romanian, and Polish. Conditions were terrible. We lived in a pigsty. The food was awful. Many people swelled up and died.

In 1942, the Germans began to act. They attacked us and we fled. We were again mobilized and formed up again. Then went to Ordzhonikidze and I worked as a loader in a warehouse. Seeing that I had some learning and was industrious, I was made a foreman. I worked there until the last minute, that is, the whole time. I was not at the front. I was not allowed. I received no money for my work, because I had been mobilized. I earned only food and clothing.

Question: Were there many Jews in Ordzhonikidze?

—I was occupied, and I lived in a pigsty, where I could not meet anyone from the city. I had no contact with them.

There were three Jews from my town with me. They were later killed.

My Arrest

Our battalion began to leave, and we remained in Armavir. In 1946, I applied from Armavir to go to Poland. Someone in the storehouse gave me nine kilos of rice on the way, so I was given two years [in prison]. There was a whole to-do with a government official. I was supposed to testify against him, but I would not. I was held for a couple of months, but when they got nothing out of me against him, they gave me two years.

I labored in Maykop in the electric station. The camp held 600 men, a few Jews, three Russians. In the camp where I worked, we ate. The standards were high.

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We dug in the earth and broke up stones near the Belaya River, where they were building an electric station. I was at this labor for two years, and I was released in 1948.

I took my documents and went to Moscow so I could be let out. There I was told, "No. Russia is big, broad. Settle down here." I wanted to go to Poland. Everyone had left, and I was alone, but I stayed in Russia.

I settled in Bratslav, a Jewish town. There I worked in photography. I sought a way to get to Poland, but I did not succeed. In 1950 I married a Jewish woman, Lize Mandelman, from Russia. She was a graduate engineer. Now she is here with her father.

After the War

After the war, a number of Jews gathered in Bratslav. There was Jewish life in the town. After my marriage in 1950, we traveled to Stalino. In Stalino, too, I worked in photography. A number of Jews were there as well. At that time there were no arrests of Jews for economic crimes. No synagogue was permitted there, so we prayed in private prayer houses. Many Russian Jews wanted to pray. There was no Jewish community. Often the tax man would come and impose heavy taxes on us and then leave.

Question: In 1953, at the time of the Doctors' Plot,¹ was there repression against the Jews?

—Yes, one felt antisemitism in the trolleys and the trams.

Question: When did you get the idea of leaving Russia?

—When repatriation became possible, I immediately went to Kiev to sign up. We went to Poland. I lived in Walbrzych for a year.

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My wife and children, as Russian citizens, had already gone to Israel, and I came a half year later. When they arrived, they were welcomed and given housing (where I still live). My wife works in the Health Ministry in a laboratory (not as an engineer). I work as a controller for Dan. We have three children, two from Russia and one sabra. My wife's father is with us. From my family, only my brother remains alive. He lives in Orlosorov 61.

Here we have an organization from our town. We gather every year for a memorial service. We are thinking of erecting a monument in Jerusalem. Our town is still in Russia.

I went to Lanovtsy after the war. I saw the graves where our dear ones were shot. All of Lanovtsy's Jews were killed, aside from those in the army or who had left. Myself, Tsvi Mahal, and Yosel Torber went to every survivor and gave them money. And because the graves had fallen over, so as not to let the spot be effaced, we put a fence all around it. It is still there. I photographed it, and I have the pictures. After the war, a score of Lanovtsy families came. In Lanovtsy itself there are now two Russian Jews. The Lanovtsy Jews have all left.

Testimony recorded and checked.

Y. Aperovits
February 1963

¹ A Soviet state-sponsored antisemitic campaign based on a conspiracy theory that prominent medical specialists, predominantly of Jewish ethnicity, intended to murder leading government and communist party officials.