KDRG YVA-132

Testimony of Pesia (Zlotnik) Bernstein, born in Kozin, Poland, 1913

Regarding her experiences in the Kozin Ghetto, Rudniki Forest,
and with the partisans, given August 1959

RG O.3, Testimonies Department of the Yad Vashem Archives,
File No. 03/1292, Item 3555783
https://documents.yadvashem.org/index.html?language=en&search=global&strSearch=pesia%20bernstein&GridItemId=3555783
Translated from Hebrew by Elizabeth Kessin Berman; edited by Ellen Garshick, September 2022

[page 1]

Yosela Karmin's project to translate testimonies, Kibbutz Magen[1]

Interviewee: Bernshteyn Pesye [Bernstein, Pesia] née Zlotnik, daughter of Pinchas and Chaye Frizer [Friesser], born Kozin, Poland, October 25, 1913; lives at 9 Shimshon Street, Tel Aviv

Level of education: Primary education

I**nterview editor:** Olga Barnitsh [Barnicz]

Place of interview: Not indicated

Date of interview: August 1959

Certifying agency: Yad Vashem, Jerusalem

Dates of the events described: 1939-1949

Places of the events: Rudniki swamp, Vilna, Lutsk, Kozin

Language and number of pages: Polish, 14 pages

Translator and typist: Helena Barkani, Shaar HaGolan

[page 2]

Summary of the Interview

The witness testimony is given by Pesye Bernshteyn [Pesia Bernstein], wife of Ilya Shenboym [Schenbaum], one of the leaders of the Jewish Underground, who had been the chairman of

[1] That is, translation into Hebrew. The testimony was originally given in Polish.

the Freiheit[2] movement as a founder and sustainer and an ideological leader of the Pioneer Youth movement.

The interviewee is a very cultured woman, well read, and knows several foreign languages, although she had only a primary education. She participated in Pioneer training in Poland before the war. The interviewee is informative not only because of her ardent Zionism, but also for her extraordinary bond with Ilya Shenboym. She speaks little of herself, but instead dwells on Shenboym's heroism in order not to draw attention to herself. With regard to all the time that Shenboym was alive, the witness describes his life and deeds with objectivity and accuracy, without unnecessary enhancements.

After describing her kibbutz training in Lithuania, the witness discusses the details of being given a work assignment from the Jewish Council in Lithuania, the organization overseeing the travel of many Jews out of the country by many different routes.

She describes the difficulties of the Soviet period, a period that was not easy for kibbutz youth movement work. The movement tried to protect its idealism and guard itself from being influenced by other ideologies. The penalties imposed under the Soviets were severe for kibbutz youth, and they were constantly being scrutinized.

The period was also difficult for the Shenboyms' relationship. When speaking about the conquest of Vilna, the witness restricts herself to speaking only about the Jewish underground, and in particular, to speaking only about Ilya Shenboym's actions. With great realism and attention to detail, she describes Shenboym's actions to command and aid the Jews. He saw the forest as a place to fight for one's life and freedom. They made connections with the Polish underground and purchased weapons. Here one must make reference to Mrs. Zaks [Sachs], wife of Eliahu Zaks, who funded the acquisition of weapons.

On reflecting upon the witness, it seems that she did not bear arms, but offered aid as much as required during an operation. But she did not lurk in the shadows.

The operations Shenboym led in opposition to the Germans continued until the liquidation of a third of the ghetto in August 1943, and then came Ilya Shenboym's death. Here she describes exactly how he was killed, as she was with him constantly, and then his hero's burial.

The underground succeeded in sending a few hundred people to the west, to the Rudniki Forest. The first period in the forest was very difficult because supplies were scarce and people lacked experience in these new conditions. Only with time, and particularly when they joined up with the Soviet partisans, did conditions begin to improve. The interviewee says that she was the household manager for the Jewish partisans and that they were connected to central headquarters, which had a link to Moscow. The interviewee describes the women's conditions among the different partisan groups and states that the Jews were treated unequally in

[2] Jewish Socialist Working Youth.

comparison to the Polish partisans who were in the same forest. Nevertheless, the relationship of the head Soviet partisan to the Jews was proper, although persons in other various positions created problems for the Jews.

In conclusion, the interviewee alludes to her family's personal tragedy and describes the fate of her niece, who ended up in Czechoslovakia, was educated there, but was not allowed to know the true identity of her biological mother.

After liberation, the interviewee returned to her former work. She married Dr. Bernshteyn, a close friend of her first husband, and they left for Europe. She continued her fieldwork in Italy and then finally came to Israel and fulfilled all that she had planned.—Olga Barnitsh [Barnicz]

[page 3]

During the war I lost :

- My father, Pinchas Zlotnik, b. 1875
- My mother, Chaya Frizer Zlotnik, b. 1881
- My sister, Etye [Etia] Zlotnik, b. 1900, and her husband, Moshe Niser, and three sons, Yitschak [Itzchak], Mordekhay [Mordechai], Avraham [Abram]
- My brother, Yisrael [Israel] Zlotnik, b. 1902, and his wife, Tova [Towa] Resnik, and their daughter, Chana
- My sister, Fanye [Fania] Zlotnik Kortshak [Korczak], b. 1910, and her husband Beril [Berl].

My Parents' Household

I am from a religious family, middle class with respect to life in Kozin. My father was a fisherman who managed other fishermen. This type of profession depended on a stable economy, and my father was very skilled in his work. He was well connected to the most respected members of the Jewish community in our town. He was very devoted to charitable deeds, and both of my parents looked after orphans, many of them always to be found in our home.

We children were given a good education considering the opportunities available locally. The girls went to the local primary school. In the beginning classes were taught in Ukrainian, but later on in Polish. In addition, I learned foreign languages at home. I received a good education in Judaism and acquired a strong connection to the Jewish people, something that affected me all throughout my life. Although my parents maintained a religious household, they did not prevent their children from developing their own progressive opinions, which were varied, but not in opposition to basic Jewish values. And so my older sister joined the Mizrachi Workers, my brother was in Betar, and I was with the Pioneers. When I started my Pioneer Youth training, my father was offered a certificate to travel to Palestine, if he committed to direct a program devoted to pioneering youth, as his occupation was not very well represented there. I recall that my father considered this.

My Thoughts and Impressions

From my earliest days, I planned to go to Palestine, so as a member of the Pioneer group in Kozin, I traveled on October 22, 1935, to a kibbutz in Sierpc. From there they sent me to training in Milodroz. This was a large farm owned by a Jewish man named Mieczyslaw Krakovski [Krakowski], father of Stefania Tuvim [Tuwim], wife of the Polish-Jewish poet. On the farm there were Polish employees, but Krakovski also employed kibbutzniks, so they were able to gain experience before traveling to Palestine. There were many who had no agricultural experience, so this was also a way to gain practical experience to live in Palestine.

In 1937, they sent me to Kibbutz Borochov at 41 Leszno in Lodz, where Ilya Shenboym was doing important work. He was the ideological leader of Kibbutz Youth. I was in Lodz until 1939. A month before the war broke out, I returned to Kozin, to my parents' house, to prepare finally for my journey. A day before the war broke out, I got a telegram from Lodz informing me about my impending travel in the next six days. World War II prevented me from acting on what I had been preparing for for so long, and it would be another 10 years until I could actually go.

The moment the war broke out, my brother enlisted in the Polish army and left, although he returned home in September 1939. I stayed in my hometown only for a short time. It was caught up in the wave of refugees fleeing the onslaught of Hitler. Every one of them hoped to come out on the other side of the border. In contrast, I traveled to Lutsk in September 1939 and there met a friend from the kibbutz. His name was Natan Blizovski [Blizowski] (now living on a kibbutz in Israel), who had come to Lutsk as a representative of the pioneer movements in order to gather groups of Jewish youth who were ready to go to Palestine. The directions were to go first to Vilna, because there they were organizing all the formal documentation for travel. Certainly Jewish youth were organized to travel, but also every Jewish person who wished to escape the current hell.

[page 4]

In the capital of Lithuania, the Jewish Council was working with great energy to make this happen. The council acquired the various documents required from a number consulates of different countries that were still operating in Lithuania. And so many left through Odessa and Krym with Japanese, Chinese, and other visas. Lithuania was at this time a safe haven for refugees of various types, not only those who wanted to save themselves from Hitlerism, but also those who did not want to encounter the Russians; it was said that they were deporting those refugees to regions east of Poland. In actuality, in September this happened to many rabbis and priests, wealthy Jews and laborers, and refugees of the volunteer movements opposed to the communist ideology. So Blizovski advised me to leave Lutsk immediately and go to Vilna.

Although I was confident that nothing more would happen to my parents, I nevertheless returned from Lutsk to Kozin with Elke Guz (now in Israel). The journey was not without obstacles. In Baranovichi, we were forced to hide in the charcoal carriage next to the train

engine, and we returned to my home as black as Kushites.[3] I had no other option for transportation, preferring this mode to walking many kilometers. When I arrived, I told my parents that I had decided to go to Palestine immediately, and I introduced the possibility of their going, too. I encountered strong opposition to this from my parents. The first time in 40 years of marriage (at least this is what my mother later told me), my father—I was his youngest child, beloved—cried the entire night out of desperation. Only my uncle, a devout old Jew with a grey beard, succeeded in finding simple words based on Talmud to explain to my parents that every child has been given his or her own destiny from birth. Therefore, there was no need to be opposed to my independence and my decisions. With a broken heart, I departed from my dearest, and in October I returned to Vilna.

Lithuania, the Place for Refugees

Comrade Blizovski's assumptions remained unchanged, even after the Lithuanians had conquered Vilna and closed the borders. The Jewish groups worked feverishly to find means of rescue. Many Poles also were crossing the borders. This was a very difficult ordeal. The winter was severe, and during the long journeys, peoples' extremities were frozen. In spite of this, it did not prevent thousands from descending upon Vilna.

My boyfriend from the Lodz Kibbutz was already there, the one who had grown up in Kovel but born in Odessa—Ilya Shenboym—the one I mentioned earlier. At last we were together. Often we had met while at the home of the Kozin rabbi's daughter, Luba Kliger, who was now in Vilna with her husband (also a rabbi). Their house became our second home. I should add that a daughter was born to them there, and she was killed in the first *aktion*, along with her mother. The rabbi worked as a gardener.

A year after going to Vilna, on November 9, 1940, I married Ilya Shenboym in the rabbi's house. Our travel to Palestine then became complicated. Even though I had a certificate for travel from the Workers' Council, the council in Vilna decided that he was much too valuable and instead imposed on him the most difficult job for Jewish youth. There was a need for someone to do courageous work, that of preventing our organization's youth from joining up with the communists, that is to say, from going from Pioneer to Komsomol.[4]

The Soviet Period in Lithuania

At this juncture, it is necessary to recall that at the beginning of August 1940, Lithuania entered into a joint agreement with Latvia and Estonia. During the early days of Soviet rule, there were no strict rules, and the Zionist movements could continue their work. During all this time, pioneers were sent off to Palestine. On December 18, 1940, the largest delegation was sent out through Russia to Odessa and then by boat. In this delegation were several hundred young people chosen by key members of the Jewish organizations. I decided to remain with my

[3] The Kingdom of Kush (c. 1070 BC-c. 550 CE) was an ancient kingdom in Nubia along the Nile Valley in present-day northern Sudan and southern Egypt.

[4] All-Union Leninist Young Communist League.

husband, who had been given a wide range of assignments. First of all, he needed to secure the kibbutz members before possible government sanctions.

[page 5]

In the meantime, we stayed in Vilna at the Shachria Kibbutz at 27 Subocz Street, a unified kibbutz. It was outside the city, and it had such an open door that people in the surrounding area used to call it the "cheap houses." It also served as the central meeting place for all the kibbutz movements, without differentiation of ideology, that is to say, from the most leftist to the most rightist, nearly 1,400 people. In this densely populated area, conditions were especially difficult with regard to housing. Five and six people were sleeping in one single bed despite the aid of the "Joint," [5] which had been operating in the Lithuanian region since Lithuania had established its alliance with Latvia and Estonia. All the movements operated separately. We remained in our kibbutz, which had about 350-360 people.

Thanks to the kindness of Dr. Eliahu Zaks [Sachs], a lawyer from Vilna and of course his wife, Sasha—they had a farm near Vilna—we got a farm near Vilkupė. It had good land, an orchard, and a dairy … it was complete. To our great sadness, the moment the Soviets came, Dr. Zaks was sent to Siberia, and much later his wife was tragically murdered in the Vilna Ghetto, a day before its liberation.

At this time, our kibbutz was standing strong. A portion of the members were involved in kibbutz operations, sewing, doing laundry, and so on. The others worked in the city, in factories, in shops, and so on. I had the administrative task of giving work assignments in the places I mentioned. My husband also worked in the kibbutz secretariat. Its members were Ayzenshteyn [Eisenstein] (from Kovel), Ber Tenenboym [Tennenbaum], Leye Fish [Lea Fisch] (from Kovel)—who had been on her way to Palestine but returned—Duvid [Dawid] Kozibrodzki (from Odess), Barantshuk [Baranczuk], and Rachel Shvarts [Ruchla Schwarz].

With time, the Soviet government began to get interested in our collective, especially when they became aware that we wanted to go to Palestine. They began to send spies and Komsomol members whose task was to lure our youth away from us to the Komsomol. It must be stated that our youth on the kibbutz knew how to stand up to this ideology, and not one went over to the Komsomol.

Breakup of the Kibbutz

The management of the kibbutz ended. This is what caused its breakup. Smaller groups of people were sent to work In different places, while the kibbutz continued to help them with necessities, arrange living situations, and send money to comrades scattered in various places in the city. Unfortunately, the Russians had the names of all our members and their dependents. Therefore, while the Soviets were organizing deportations deep into the Soviet Union, they made every attempt to capture our kibbutzniks. Many were sent to Siberia.

[5] Joint Distribution Committee.

Perhaps one can say that this was not a good idea, because people with ideologies similar to theirs were deported together along with our people. My husband and I were also hunted everywhere, and we moved from movie theater to movie theater, because theaters were places we could hide in. We didn't sleep at home. During a number of winter months we hid in a lumber storage barn that belonged to our landlord. One would sleep while the other rested. We spent the Soviet period in great difficulty.

My husband, who was trained as an electrical engineer, began to work as an electrician for a Soviet organization. In spite of this, I sought work in a pharmacy owned by a Jewish family by the name of Katz. Both members of the family were pharmacists, Russian Jews, who were very much interested in the pioneer movement. They knew who I was and received me, grateful for the help in their laboratory. The extra income helped us. I remained at the pharmacy even after it was nationalized and the owners worked there as employees. Later on we had trouble with our passports. We could not get Soviet citizenship. We had hoped that in spite of the situation with our documentation we would get permission to travel to Palestine. Our hope was in vain. We remained in Vilna until war broke out between the Soviets and the Germans.

Hitler's Conquest of Vilna; the Period of the Jewish Underground

On July 6, 1941, we entered the ghetto with no belongings. I will not talk about the Vilna Ghetto itself; this subject has been described elsewhere.[6] Instead I would like to talk about the Jewish underground in Vilna. This was a movement named after my husband—the Shenboym movement.

[page 6]

He indeed was the leader. He did not try to set up an independent underground in the city itself, because as far as it appeared from the beginning, an organization like this would be a failure. His vision was to get out of the city because, as far as he determined, only there was it possible to fight for Judaism, for existence, for the freedom of democracy. My husband did not harbor small ambitions, and he was not only looking out for his own interests. As a result, he steadily connected with the Polish underground, and through them he was able to acquire weapons and lead our people from the ghetto to the forest.

While he was working as an electrician for the Germans in a camp on the outskirts of Vilna, he had the opportunity to foster a connection with the Polish underground. I remember that he purchased weapons and transported them through a connection called "Jadwiga." I don't know anything else about my husband's connections.

In the ghetto there was a woman named Sasha Zaks, a lawyer's wife, mentioned earlier. She was involved in our organization, primarily aiding us monetarily to acquire weapons. During the two years that we were incarcerated in the ghetto, we were able to send out a few hundred

[6] For an account of the events in the Vilna ghetto, including the role of Pesia Bernstein's husband, Ilya (Yechiel) Shenbaum, see https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/during/ghetto_last_days.asp..

strong men to the forest. Their assignment was to establish a route to bring the weapons to a particular place. Occasionally the least dangerous assignments were given to the least suspicious women. Like other underground organizations, we sent women to Bialystok for special assignments. Under my command, I sent one of my former comrades from the Lodz kibbutz, who later was with us the whole time in Vilna—Yehudit Shnayder [Judith Szneider]—and with her was Mordekhay Tenenboym [Mordechai Tennenbaum]. Sadly, she was killed there carrying out the underground's assignment.

The Dror[7] and Freiheit movements reorganized all youths who were disbanded in the ghetto. My husband organized an aid society for children and orphans, to take care of them in times of war and tend to their needs. It was astonishing how the children were drawn to us. He was the ideological heart of the organization. They called me "mummy," but my husband was the one who was truly beloved. Our apartment became the nucleus of the movement, and it is difficult not to exaggerate because it was just one room in which 12 people lived. The dining table was used as a bed. In spite of this, there was a warm corner for the young ones, a place where there was always something they needed. We shared everything, even clippings from potatoes, from which I made all sorts of tasty things.

During the first year, I wasn't working, but only until the order came from the occupying government demanding that women were also obligated to work. I went to work in a factory. In it I made house slippers for shipment to the Germans. I worked there for about a year.

Jewish Opposition to the Occupation

Belonging to our organization were, of course, people who were part of the Jewish ghetto police, who were aware of the occupiers' movements, which was not common knowledge. And so, we were made aware that in August 1943 the Germans were going to demand about 5,000 persons from the *Judenrat*, and this was something that the *Judenrat* head, Yakov Genz [Jakow Gens], was going to fulfill. In other words, this demand was intended to be an *aktion* to liquidate Jews, even though the Judenrat announced that these people were being enlisted for labor. In the morning, Lithuanians came to the ghetto and removed about 100 people. The police promised that they would deliver the remaining people if the Lithuanians left the ghetto. The Lithuanians agreed on the condition that this would be accomplished by 6:00 p.m., and if not, they would reenter the ghetto and resume the roundup. And so the commander of our movement decided that the moment the Lithuanians returned to the ghetto, we had to resist, using our weapons and preventing them from taking additional people, because they explained that the rest of the people were not being taken for work; rather, they were being sent to their deaths.

Ilya Shenboym's Death

During the day, we dug up the weapons we had buried. There were not a lot, but at any rate, they could be used and spread to several points throughout the ghetto. Straszuna 6, the

[7] A Zionist socialist movement; *dror* means "freedom."

location of the Jewish library, was our headquarters. Through the adjoining rooftops of 7 and 8 Straszuna, there was a secret passageway that also served as a getaway. My husband, who had been an officer in the Polish army, was the commander of the operation. I didn't want to become separated from him during this time, so I stayed with him and loaded weapons. In our unit there were about 40 able people. They were in a house at 12 Straszuna. When the Lithuanians returned to the ghetto to resume their operation, because we did not meet their demands, shots began to be fired. We began to fire from the house at 15 Straszuna, and my husband was the first to return fire on the Lithuanians. The fire grew intense. My husband's position was higher than the enemy's and at an advantage, but in a short time, an enemy bullet hit him in his carotid artery. He was killed immediately. He fell dead and blood exploded from his throat like a fountain. Because I was beside him constantly, even at this tragic moment, I was awash in his blood. But I still had an ounce of strength, so I pulled him into a third room, which was a classroom, and I laid him between the benches.

[page 7]

During this whole time, he never took his hand off his gun, and he died with it. Afterward, everyone wanted his gun.

In the meantime, the Lithuanians were planting bombs near our headquarters, and when one exploded, everyone fled. I was with my husband. The armed comrades did not forget me and began to call for me. So I jumped from the second-floor window—and it is difficult to describe—in this fall I suffered no injuries. I got to the secret passageway, and by way of the rooftops, I reached the headquarters. At 6:00 the shooting stopped because the ammunition was depleted. The Lithuanians then retreated.

The next day, I went to the place where I had left my husband, and I found him in the same state as I had left him, except that shards of glass had exploded and cut him deeply.

I went to my husband's good friend, Dr. Leon Bernshteyn [Bernstein], a mathematician and dean of the University of Memel, who had known my husband in Vilna while we were all working in our movement. They were close friends, inseparable, despite their absolute differences: my husband was from the city, full of spirit. But his friend was the opposite … reserved and quiet. He wouldn't leave his body, and it was he who accompanied my husband's body and me to the ghetto's morgue. The body remained there for four days. On the fifth day, Jewish Vilna organized a funeral for a hero who had fallen with a gun in his hand defending Jews. A total of 12,000 Jews escorted the deceased, with only one policeman, and later there were five enemy guards, who did not know whom they were escorting.

It is difficult to add here, but also among those who were in the escort were those who removed my husband's shoes from his feet. His shoes were made to order, and the cobbler, Meier Volozni [Wolozny] (now in Holon), recognized them later in the possession of one of the partisans who was with us in the forest. I cannot add a single word about this fellow. They also took his watch from his arm, but they returned it to me later in the city.

People from all Jewish organizations who were connected with Vilna Underground participated In this aktion, and they were organized under the FPO.[8]

From the day of my husband's funeral, the destruction of the ghetto began.

Escape from the Ghetto to the Forest

Everyone believed that the only way to save one's life was to escape from the ghetto. So everyday groups left the ghetto, almost of them able men with weapons. We had only 2 *puliomioty*.[9] On the evening of August 14, 1943, I left with Dr. Bernshteyn; on August 28 the liquidation of the ghetto began.

Our group left the ghetto at the last opportunity, allowed by a single Jewish policeman who took us out in pairs. The first objective was to get to an automobile in the center of the city. This auto was driven by a Lithuanian who was given 10 golden rubles for each soul transported. He took the Jewish partisans to the main road near the Sorok Tartary forest. It was said that there would be someone waiting to guide us, a person named Tatar, who was our connection. It was said that someone was supposed to take us to the forest some 40 kilometers from Vilna, the Rudniki Forest. We walked in pairs, everyone knowing the signal for progressing on the city streets, keeping in contact, and arriving at the vehicle that was supposed to transport us. Even though we were all armed, we feared coming into contact with the German wave. We succeeded without incident, but on the bridge in Vileyka, Germans were patrolling. So we changed our route and succeeded in crossing the river in our clothes. This saved us from being captured by the Germans. Afterward, we avoided walking on the roads and instead crossed the plowed farmlands. Our shoes sank into the wet earth, and the earth stuck to our shoes and weighed them down. Finally, shortly before dawn, we reach the appointed place, where our guide was waiting.

The Swamp[10]

Rudniki Swamp—the name suits its true condition. Beyond a tangle of shrubs and vegetation, it was a damp swamp, very dangerous. It was closed in from every side, and those within could be swallowed up. It was so dangerous that the Germans avoided it, even though they knew that within was serious opposition.

The first days were very difficult. All the basic necessities were lacking, even tents to protect us from the weather. We had to use anything we could get to cover our heads.

Until December 1943, we were exposed to the elements. Every night everyone tried to get any kind of covering.

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[8] Fareynikte Partizaner Organizatsye (United Partisan Organization), a Jewish resistance organization based in the Vilna Ghetto.

[9] The meaning of this term is not clear.

[10] For an account of the events in the Rudniki Forest (swamp), see https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/during/partisans_rudniki_forest.asp.

[page 8]

It rained and snowed. In the mornings, our clothes were soaked. Lice flourished in these conditions. But hunger was the cruelest. In the evenings we stole a beet and a cabbage, and we cooked these, and they tasted horrible without salt.

Partisans

The beginning of the partisan movement was spontaneous, very unorganized, and people were not trained. It was also like that with us. But now we found ourselves within an authentic, organized partisan unit, a military operation. A Belarusian named Batya trained us and began to show us how to be partisans. After this, we truly began to become partisans. A number of people came from far away, from a group called *za Pobiedu*,[11] and in the end we became part of a group with 170 Jews in it. Among us was one Russian, who came to us from a Russian camp, and one person from Holland. There were few women. A number of people from the surroundings joined us—those who had fled to the forest with their wives before the final liquidation. There were brothers with sisters and a number of young girls. I never left the forest, and I managed the living quarters, so I had endless work, because I was responsible for supplies, laundry, care of the sick, and so on.

Not far from us were the "white partisans." They were made up of Poles who were fighting for Polish interests. They hated us wholeheartedly for two reasons: first, because we were Jews, and second, because they knew that women slept together with the men; with them, the men slept alone. Meeting up with the Polish group was always unpleasant.

The Partisan Leadership

With time we began to integrate fully with the regular fighting groups. A Russian partisan commander named Yurgis [Jurgis], a Lithuanian, came from Moscow to take the top command of the central unit. The commander of our unit was a Russian Jew named Shmit [Szmidt], known as Didzalis, who had been living in Vilna. He maintained steady connections with Russia. He had basic equipment, like a radio and other things. At the end of December, when conditions in the forest were more organized, we moved to another area. There were earth shelters, a stove, a kitchen, and tents. There we had cooking utensils and something more important—something to put into the pots, that is to say, food … but no salt. This problem had no solution.

Jewish Partisan Headquarters

The Jewish partisans had their own bunker, and of course it was connected to the general headquarters. The one in charge was a woman who had been a famous Jewish Communist from Vilna before the war. Her name was Chine Borovska [Chiena Borowska]. Before that, she was Ressel and her pseudonym was Shabrinski [Szabrinski]. The commanding officer was Shmuel [Szmul] Kaplinski. From the Polish point of view, the group was diverse. We had Bundists,

[11] "To victory," a partisan division.

Zionists, Communists, and Komsomol youth. Everyone knew that we Zionists would leave for Palestine after the war (if we lived). Borovska herself did not hide this intel, and in one of her conversations with me she admitted that she knew. I also did not conceal my political ambitions. In our group was also Dr. Selka Garfunkel from Vilna, who later died in the land he considered his homeland during the War of Independence.

Our Relationship with the Russian Partisans

Generally speaking, our relationship with the Russian partisans was unexceptional. We received orders and executed them, and there were no differences between us. But in one-on-one encounters, for instance when meeting in the forest or in private conversations, it was clear that Russians despised us.

When a Russian encountered a lone Jewish partisan in the forest who happened to be wearing a pair of shoes, the Russian would take those shoes without blinking an eye. The same could be applied to a gun. It was also known that the Russians lusted after the Jewish women, because there were no women in their group. We decided that if conditions permitted, we would separate from Moscow's support. When we could organize our own airfield, we would be able to get our own supplies by air. The most important of these was medical supplies. With them we were able to deal with scabies, boils, and other diseases. We even created a laboratory. We solved the problem of missing shoes. We sewed shirts from parachute fabric. We encountered a fabric factory that had linens. There was even a sewing machine.

When we returned from our work, there was an opportunity to shower and remove lice. Now there was no shortage of meat. We had the most meat, and we got it from the surrounding villages. Because among us was a Lithuanian from Kovno who used to make sausages, we had abundant sausages.

[page 9]

We also got salt in adequate amounts, and also potatoes. But we rationed these. Thanks to our good diet and personal hygiene, the amount of illness was reduced, and people recovered from sicknesses. The Germans seldom patrolled the forest. But even so, the punishment for betrayal was severe. There was one Lithuanian peasant who betrayed the partisans, and consequently he was punished severely. In the dead of night, they attacked the entire village, and everyone was burned alive. No one was left alive. The guards took care of that.

Partisan Attacks on the Germans

Partisan officers were trained like all other officers—to surround the enemy and ambush him. Men went out for missions, blowing up bridges, train tracks, and transformers. The women among us who were trained were the liaisons. Our life in the forest was difficult, but we carried on with the hope of liberation and of regaining our lives, each according to his or her own desires, according to his or her own abilities.

Abandoning the Forest

We left the forest on July 13, 1944, and headed toward Vilna. The night of July 15 was very difficult. The Germans did not want to give up, and the battles between the Germans and the Russians continued at the Zielony Bridge. Many partisans who survived the forest fell from stray bullets.

Recounting My History and the Account of my Family

On my arrival in Vilna, I immediately wrote to the Kozin community to find out my loved ones' fate. I received a sad response from my aunt that no one from my family had survived, except for Hindi, my sister Fani's daughter. My sister had married during the war in 1942 and given birth to a daughter. When she realized that her situation was hopeless, she and her husband arranged to hide with a Czech family near Kozin. But this family did not want to take them with an infant; they had agreed to take on only adults. So in the winter my sister went to a woman from another Czech family, a woman who also hid children. But she wouldn't accept an infant either. My sister didn't have any choice, so she hid the baby in a chicken coop belonging to the woman in the hope of appealing to her emotions. And so, at night the baby cried, and the woman took her, a baby girl only a month and a half old, and raised her. After the war ended, my aunt's daughter, who knew where the child was hidden, found the woman and asked for the child. They agreed on an amount totaling 5,000 rubles. But when the time came for the exchange, the Czech woman had second thoughts. The Russian commissioner came and took the child by force. The matter was brought before the judge. The child was already five years old. The judgment was not favorable for the family, because they asked the child where she wanted to be. Naturally, because the child didn't know her real family, she wanted to remain with the people who had raised her. In the opinion of the court, to our great injustice, only the biological mother had the right to the child. Since the child's biological mother was no longer living, the court awarded the child to the family who raised her. And no one could tell the little child who her biological parents were and who her family was now.

With the repatriation of these lands under the Soviet Union, the Czech woman applied to return to her country. And so we completely lost my sister's daughter. And then there was no one to whom I could return in Kozin. Not one of my acquaintances was still living. I wanted to revive my life as it was before the war, that is to say, to go to Palestine. At first I started working as an account manager in Spec-Torg. I made this connection through a link to my partisans. After a while I decided to marry Dr. Leon Bernshteyn. Both of us were alone. He had lost his whole family during the occupation, and I was left all by myself. So we decided to create a new family. He returned to the university, to the faculty of mathematics and physics. He had left the forest in such a desperate state that his friends had to collect money in order to clothe him so he could begin work.

When I repatriated as Polish, I was able to return to Poland. My husband was a Lithuanian citizen. So our situation was not simple. With great anxiety, we left Vilna as Mrs. Shenboym and Mr. Bernshteyn, university professor and Lithuanian partisan with a female Polish citizen,

because marriage was not legal. We made it to Poland, first to Bialystok, then Lublin, and later to Czechoslovakia, through Hungary to Romania, and then finally to Austria. In 1946 we crossed via Graz, a British transit camp, to the border with Italy. There the Jewish Brigade, which was stationed there, brought us to Italy. For half a year we were in Milan and later in Rome. There my husband worked at a committee for displaced persons, and I worked at the Division of Italian Partisans, in the area that was working on emigration for people without permissions.

[page 10]

During this time thousands of needy people were seeking passage to Palestine. By 1948 I transitioned to working officially in the Israeli consulate with Dr. Sorani from the Jewish Agency. In March 1949 I arrived in Israel, finally accomplishing the plans I had made in 1935.

This testimony I made according to my free will, according to the dictates of conscience and knowledge.

Pesye Bernshteyn

Olga Barnitsh, editor and recorder of the testimony[12]

[12] Five pages in Polish, on Ilya Shenboym's activities, follow. They have not yet been translated.