

PARTISAN

By James Collins

I met an old acquaintance of mine, Jonas Landau and his wife Wanda at Dr. Frank's office on Tuesday, July 27, 2015. This is a brief compilation of the story he told me which is in segments because he kept going back and forth to various parts of his experience.

Jonas originally came from Belorussia as a teenager of about 13. He and his friend came back to the village from a brief trip. The surviving villagers told him to hide in the woods because his entire family, who were Jewish, had been shot by the Waffen SS. Jonas and his friend who was about 12 years older than he joined a partisan group and lived in the forests. Jonas told me there were many animals in the forest but they could not hunt them for food because they had to count every bullet. The only way they obtained a bullet supply was off the bodies of Germans that they had killed in ambush. Jonas described how they would string wire across the road to kill Germans riding motorcycles as couriers. The partisans would set the wire at a specific height to catch the rider on his chest and, at the speed they were riding, this would decapitate them. They would strip off both the uniform and boots and take weapons, ammunition and any food or other supplies.

By October 1943 there were six separate Soviet partisan groups working in this huge forest area, each associated with a different town or district. This day was a particular holiday celebrating the actual Russian Revolution in 1917. Jonas remembered that they had food at the party that he had not seen in years. They had huge gallon jugs full of honey and they had large loaves of white bread. Nobody had seen white bread for a couple of years. Normally they had limited rations and had to raise their own food. Since they were farmers, they created vegetable gardens in the open spaces of the forest. The only thing they were always short of and missed the most was salt. Of course, there were massive supplies of vodka. The six groups all met together for this party, which consisted of about 500 partisans. They spread over an open area well into the center of the forest.

Unfortunately, the Germans were aware of this celebration by the Polish/Russian partisans. They surrounded the area with two divisions of the Waffen SS consisting of 40,000 men. The Germans had armored tanks and other support vehicles but the tanks could not enter into the forest because there were no roads and the trees were massive, preventing maneuvering. The Germans lined up artillery around the outskirts of the forest and, for several hours, fired shells in from each direction. The shells were set to burst at treetop level sending showers of

splinters branches and entire trees down upon whoever was below. Jonas said the splinters wounded several people but the only casualties were several horses. The partisans knew they could not confront the Nazi soldiers on a one-on-one basis because they are outnumbered 80 to 1. However, they had numerous members of the partisans who grew up in the area and, as loggers and foresters; they knew all the terrain around the entire forest area. These men met with the leaders of the partisan bands and they agreed that they would lead the entire contingent out of the forest by taking them through a swamp. Once they were in the swamp, each of the men was up to their chest carrying their weapons and supplies over their heads. The entire 500 men were able to avoid the German outposts and patrols. All 500 escaped and then set up ambushes to pick off small groups of Germans who wandered away from their lines. The Germans announced, over the radio, that they had severely decimated the partisans and had killed a couple dozen. Jonas laughed and told me the only ones that they got were the horses. Not a single man was lost due to the artillery or the surprise raid.

After this escape, the partisans received a new task. The Russians wanted them to interdict and destroy the railroad system that the Germans were using to transport arms, ammunition and troops, north into the Kursk area. The Russians supplied the partisans with new explosives and new sensors, which would go underneath the railroad tracks and detonate when the train depressed the track. This new technique was a blessing to the partisans who previously had to use explosives with wires, which, if detected, cost the lives of many of the partisans. They continued on this task and greatly reduced the supplies for the German Army. This was apparently a major asset in the defeat of the Germans in the Kursk salient.

Jonas related how his unit united with invading Russian troops under the command of Gen. Zakharov. The Red Army defeated the German units and took most of them prisoner as they continued on their way towards Berlin. The partisans folded into the red Army to act as reinforcements for this drive. Jonas, declared too young, received an honorable discharge from the partisans. To this day Jonas drinks a toast to the Russian General each year on the anniversary of his liberation. He traveled through many countries in Europe as a displaced person, picking up five languages and found his wife in Austria. Jonas then obtained an engineering degree and came to America. He told me that every year on the anniversary of his liberation; he has a large vodka as a toast to general Zakharov. He feels his very life was spared by Zakharov's defeat of the Germans in his district. Now retired, Jonas,

Wanda some of their children and their grandchildren reside in Nashua New Hampshire after a very active and eventful life.

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