

Times were Changing by Ruth Chevion

Sitting in a Russian jail, my father Pelek age 17, and his brother Alex age 15, had a conversation. You might call it a heated conversation. Alex was angry.

"Fifty of us are sitting in jail because of you," Alex said. "You and your violence. It's all your fault. Look what you've done. Why couldn't you?...Why didn't you?...Why can't you...?"

Pelek replied: *"I won't accept...Why should we?...I will fight back...He called us dirty Jews. Why should we take that?"*

They had left Tarnów in a bus at the outset of the Nazi invasion of Poland. Miriam and Elchanan, the boys' parents, had made the same decision that thousands of other families all over Poland made — that the men must escape before it is too late. A mass exodus of Polish men occurred in the first weeks of September 1939, including some 300,000 Jewish men. Apparently, it was known that wherever the Germans occupied, they immediately executed the leaders, and then hunted down men for slave labor in their mines and factories.

How dismayed Elchanan must have felt after the sacrifice he and Miriam had made, especially the pain of their separation. At the first landing of the bus inside Russia, not only was the bus confiscated, but then his own son Pelek did something that landed all fifty men from the bus in jail.

Zooming in on how this came about...After the men lost the bus, they were walking in the street. A man demanded to see their papers. This man was actually a plainclothes policeman, but he appeared to be a regular civilian, so my dad refused. The officer pulled a revolver and started in with insults like "dirty Jew, runaway scum," etc. My dad suddenly pushed the man's arm up from below in a wide arc so that the gun fell to the ground. A wrestling match for control of the gun ensued. Before long, police backup came. All fifty men were arrested, not just my dad. (Vicarious punishment being a favorite of authoritarian regimes.)

The surprise upshot was that the men were charged not with brawling, but with spying for Germany. The undercover cop attested that he had seen them signaling to a plane, that he saw them using a light and a mirror.

You and I know, dear reader, that Alex and Pelek and the others will be released after the Chief of Police from Tarnów shows up and vouches for them. But the two brothers do not know this. They are tense. They have been charged with a capital offense. They face being hanged as spies, along with their father. In this dire situation they speak bitterly, and also honestly about being Jews, about antisemitism, about ethics. They are serious young men.

Decades later around 1990, Alex and I are in his living room in New Jersey recording his experiences in the war. He tells me about this incident of being in jail with my dad and how they argued.

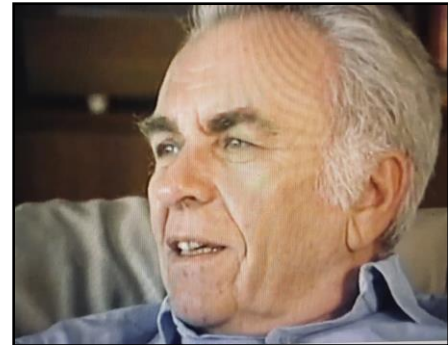
Here is some of what Alex said about it, in his own words:

"We were taught from the earliest age never to use our hands. Never to fight. Only to run away if we were threatened. We were taught to count to ten, even with each other. Never to say harsh words or loud words. This was the Jewish way in

Poland for hundreds of years. It was drummed into us constantly. I remember I wasn't even allowed to carry a stick. Sometimes, you know, a boy likes to carry a stick, but this was forbidden. As to guns, or rifles, never. It was considered low. Only the lowest characters, people we looked down on, would use a gun.

"But times were changing. There were young people like Pelek, who refused to accept this way of life...Even among the adults, there was a group called Revisionists, who believed that the land of Israel must be won by force. Most people still thought we should buy the land from the Arabs. But we had a cousin who was a Revisionist. Times were changing. We were changing."

For my part, dear reader, I barely recognize my father in this story. Yes, he was strong physically, and he was courageous, but I never heard him talk about wanting to hit someone. Yes, he hated anti-Semitism, but foremost, he loved being Jewish. He taught me the *Shema*. He taught me to read Hebrew. I remember how he loved to do *havdalah* after shabbat. I would say his concerns for social justice showed most in the decent way he treated the people who worked for him. In that sense, I do recognize my dad in this story.



This photo of Alex was taken by my son Paul while Alex was telling this story. Alex fought in the war for Israel Independence in 1948. Ironically, perhaps, he served in an engineering unit that designed and improvised weapons for the new Israeli army.



My father Pelek's photo on his US citizenship papers.