Hollywood Temple Beth El was home to many Holocaust survivors. Not all survivors were in concentration camps. Some were active in the battles, behind the lines, against the Nazis and their allies, fighting in paramilitary groups referred to as “ Partisans”. Max Cukier, one of our stalwart members at Hollywood Temple Beth El, was one of those brave figures.

This link is to a website that tells about him and features video interviews with him:

<https://www.jewishpartisans.org/partisans/max-cukier>

Below, is a copy of a letter that he shared with me, of his correspondence with Sarah Shenir-Neshmit, of Kibbutz Lochamei Hagetaot ( Warriors of the Ghettos), who had just published a book on the battles in the ghettos and forest of WWII Europe. In this letter, he explains how he and the others partisans with him operated. This is a valuable historical document.

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Sarah Shenir-Neshmit

Kibbutz Lochamei Hagetaot

January 13, 1994

Dear Sarah,

 I hope this finds you in good health. I am writing you to set matters straight about events in our mutual past.

 About six years ago, our mutual friend of the Beiruch family told me of your book, in which you mentioned" Barukh Cukierkopf". They were sure you meant me, Melech (Max).

 I called you the next day and introduced myself," This is not Barukh, this is Melech." You answered me then, " Melech is not alive. He was killed!" However, when I described to you my activities, you responded that you wished to see me right away.

 Six months later, I made a special trip. We recognized each other after 50 years, and we began to speak of the tragedy of Dvoretz.

 I saw the good work you are doing, your dedication to the partisan movement, and the partisans in Israel spoke highly of you. All the partisans who knew me, told me that the only address in Israel is Bet Lochamei Hagetaot, where , under your leadership and dedication , you are doing monumental work on behalf of the partisan movement.

 Five days later, I came over and picked you up, to take you to the Dan Panorama in Haifa, where I hosted a reception. You remember that I invited you and Bella Bornstein, who was very active in the partisans. You remembered her and helped her in her latest book, Hayaar Hayah Habayit Sheli [The Forest Was My Home] . Her husband , who was there, is also a very dedicated man. I also had some other survivors of the Dvoretz camp there.

 We talked , but you never asked me about my past, but only about Yad Layeled. On the way to the kibbutz, we only spoke about Yad Layeled.

 The second time I was on the kibbutz with my wife, I saw right away that you wanted to know her experiences, but you did not ask about mine.

 You need to know that for the past 50 years, I have the pain of knowing the truth about the experiences of the partisans in saving lives. You know the literature about the partisans and the underground. I have a lot of reservations about it. That is the reason all of my good friends who fought alongside or whom I helped asked me why I didn't write a book , since I was in the partisans from Bereshit , from the beginning.

 You never asked me, but the last time I came for the summer, Gewelber called me to his office and showed me the book by Yitzhak Zuckerman of the Warsaw ghetto. He told me," Melech, we really want to publish your book. It would take a month to do." But I never gave him a full answer.

 This year, I took my trip to Russia, Emek Habacha [the Vale of Tears] , from Brest-Litovsk, Baranovich, Novogorodik, Dvoretz, Lida, Evia, Volozhin. In some places , I put up monuments. In flying twice to Russia, I read through Zuckerman's book, about 680 pages of it on the plane. I looked it over very carefully.

 There is no question that he was a gibor yisrael [hero of Israel] . I started to change my mind about my own experiences. I don't want to take everything with me to the grave.

 I have been a big believer that we, as the weaker side, should not bring out in the open the role of the Judenrat, the police, kapo in the lager (Camps). There were also the problems of the family groups, wherein the father may have been killed, and such families were in the forest without help. There were also the problem of the b'nai hair ,fellow townspeople. For example, the people of Dvoretz thought of each other first; so , each one for his own shtetl.

 I decided on this last trip to mention things that I never saw in any other books. I hope, since I know you, yourself, were not a native of the area, you would understand what it was like. Sarah, I had no support in Dvoretz- I had only a small group. I took my life into my hands to go into the camp alone, to take out young people, to convince them that they have no chance to survive just because they were working for the Germans as stone-cutters(the stones were used in the front lines). Their chances were not better than anyone else's.

 When I called you from Geneva, on my way back home, I asked you about your opinion of what Gewelber mentioned. You told me that to write my book would take a year's time. You mentioned that it had taken about a year to write a book about the troop ( otriat) from Slonim. You then said, "We have no history about you, your parents, your home town."

 I must say that I was surprised, why you did not ask me anything about this when I was with you at the kibbutz. You mentioned in your book that you saw me limping with my wounded leg, , but you never mentioned or asked me how I was wounded, when I was in Israel the last time.

 We are both in the Neilah [twilight] years. I never expected Bet Lochamei Hagetaot to write the account for me, but since you are the last to witness and you know the history and the details, I felt I needed to call you and get your opinion. I hope when you finish my letter of the story of Baranovich, Dvoretz, Meitchet( Molczad ), and Zhtil that I can make the statement, "Yadeynu lo shafchu et hadam hanaki hazeh"---our hands did not spill this innocent blood."

 I want to go over my account. You will find that I will not tell guzmaot -exaggerations.

 My philosophy is that more important than Yichus avot [Family Heritage] is yichus atzmi [my personal heritage]. How you behave and what you do, not where you are from. I am proud of my parents but I am not bragging.

 My background is from a small town between Warsaw and Lublin, from a Hasidic family. If you want to know more, there is a Yizkorbuch [Memorial Book] of my town, Sefer Riki [The Book of Riki]. There , you will see my picture, my background, my environment.

 I will give you a general picture of how I came to the area of Dvoretz and why I was a partisan .From 1941 till July, 1942, I was in your area, but never registered in Dvoretz. I was in Meitchet (Molczad), in a small town near Baranovich and Novogorodik.

 This is how I came to Dvoretz. I was a refugee at the age of 20 in White Russia, wandering with groups through White Russia and the Lithuanian border in order to get to Palestine(in 1939-40). We were caught and settled in the little town of Zolodik. The Russian government asked all refugees to become Soviet citizens or register to return to German-occupied Poland. Most of my group registered to go back to Poland.

 After two months, I received a pass to leave Zolodik ( near Lida)

and go to another town close to Baranovich--Meitchet. It held 2,000 refugees, entire families from border towns. All had the same kind of passport, which allowed to work by day in Baranovich and sleep at night in Meitchet.

 After three months, I received a 5-year passport, with the same conditions(not in a large city, not within 100 km near the border). Later, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, I was in the town on a Sunday morning, You know the confusion-tohu vavohu [utter chaos]. .

 Within a week, the Germans occupied the whole area. In all villages they established "Judenrat"[ Jewish councils set up by the Nazis to administer the ghetto for them] . Since I was young and single, with no family-they asked me to be part of the Judenrat. I answered " I do not want to help the Nazi war machine. " We never dreamed that a civilized nation could kill 100's of 1000's just because they were Jewish.

 In this little town of Meitchet, mostly refugees joined the Judenrat. The President was Ehrlich, from Danzig who spoke a good German, to represent the 3,000 people of Meitchet.

 We were hostile. Just six weeks after the takeover, they began to build ghettos and camps.

 I made up my mind not to be naive, to be part of the war machine and take lives.

 I started working on a farm for a Polish man, who took me in because I spoke Polish. I then took 15 people to Bialogorno village to work and registered with the Meitchet Judenrat there.

 One day, I was told that at night the Gestapo took the Jewish fellow from whom I rented my room in Meitchet and sent him to Horodysz. I looked for his brother-in-law who had escaped to Dvoretz.

One month later, his niece, Lotta Shteyn, asked me to find out what happened.

 We saw Horodysz-it looked like Bialik's Ir Haharega [City of Slaughter, an elegy on the 1904 pogrom]. Gentiles told me that three weeks earlier, everyone was killed.

This was the first shock, that they killed women and children. This man from Meitchet was killed because he was a starker, a gibor [ strong man] .

 There was no way that the shtetl could survive. The only thing this gentile said," It was a communist town and they had burned Hitler's picture." It was a false story.

 I told the niece," Tell the Judenrat this was the first butchery." The girl told me," Max, the commissioner of the area there asked Mr. Ehrlich to send 60 youth to Lesnajo forest . They had taken so many POW's , they were afraid of epidemic, and they needed people to bury the dead. They were taken from 100 towns and villages for this purpose.

 For me it was clear what would happen. She said." Max, you are the first on the list to send to Lesnajo forest."

 The family I lived with offered me some places I could go underground. I couldn't return to Bialogorni. I found a gentile woman who spoke Yiddish better than the Jews and lived there outside the city limits. I made a deal to stay over. She hid me in a storage bin for potatoes, which was warm,and gave me daily news of what's happening.

 After six or seven days, she said, " The Gestapo is going door to door looking for Max." I left, went back into Bialogorni, and worked at odd jobs. My friends in Meitchet came by, and sent me to Dvoretz, where her father lived( he had escaped earlier). It was about 4-5 miles away.

 I came to Dvoretz. It was the first time I saw a camp with wires. There were so many young people from all the towns around, those that were not killed. They were put to work cutting stones for use in the front. They believed that the Gestapo would not harm them if they were working.

 I couldn't stay in Dvoretz and I was afraid that they knew about me in the Judenrat. I began to go around the villages and started to find a way to survive in the forests, because I had seen the miserable deaths of all our people.

 How did I get organized?

 I was in a strange country, different language, different place, without family, and only 4 or five other refugees from Poland that I knew. What to do?

At that time, the Red Army fled, and in their confusion, they left ammunition behind--guns, rifles, grenades, tanks. The villagers took these and we found out who had them.

 How could I make connection with these who knew I was not legally in the ghetto. In the mountains around Dvoretz, the young people cut stones and dragged them in carts. I started to talk to them," How can we live , eat and sleep in the forest," they asked. " Look at me, I said. " I live in the forest. In the morning , I went into Dvoretz, built my base( since Meitchet was still open, I could go there at night) .I slept in the attic of a family. The Judenrat and the commandos of the Einsatzgruppen have asked them to make ditches. They claim it is to put in gas and oil reserves. No! These are graves for yourselves you are making."

 We spoke to some youth who had been in the Polish army. We gave them rifles ( brought from the peasants). We began to go to the villages where there were Jews, burn the village, create a distraction, to enable the young people there to escape.

 In Meitchet, no one was willing to burn down their house but five people began to shoot. The SS thought they were being attacked. Jews began to run.( Three who escaped are now alive in New York) The Germans killed everyone who didn't escape. On the second day, I entered and heard that the Germans had announced that whoever had escaped the shehitah [slaughter] could return unharmed.

 Some women and children were also on the outside, wandering in the forests. We settled these people in the Horki and Svorotva forests.

 We told the people of Dvoretz what happened to Meitchet.

The President of the Judenrat, Novik, had a daughter, Sarah. She told me, "You are right, but I can't get through to my father." She was my savior, because when people warned the Judenrat about me, she tipped me off.

 How could I save the youth, mostly orphans, in Dvoretz?

How could I get them not to believe in the Judenrat and Gestapo, and go into the forest. It is for that reason, as you noticed in your book, that I was not very cautious, because I tried hard to convince them. Till now, I have a pain in my heart for these hundred's of youth who were lost. Sixty to seventy percent of them would have survived to take revenge.

 In every trip, I took out 1,2 or 3 at a time--the group grew to 15-20 people.

 Gentiles told us of POW's wandering in the area-- High officers of the Red Army who had escaped German capture. We asked permission to join in with them, but they didn't want to be together with us.

 We found a young Jew, Misha, who lived with a gentile girl , in the Svorotve forest. He was a teacher. He told us we could organize ourselves as a small force and later on the Russians would take us into account.

 In the forest we met a Colonel Zolotov of the Red Army, who was an escaped POW, He was a dedicated party member and with him was Captain Boris Grozny and 4 or 5 other escapees. they had 2 automatic rifles, and two horses & buggies. We asked them to join up, but they said that neither group was big enough to work together. It would be better to work separately . This was in March or April of 1942.

 Two days later, Zolotov was wounded, and they had no medicine nor any medic to treat him.

 I offered to go to Dvoretz and get medicine with my connections.

 I came into the camp through the mountains, staying with the youth( ages 15-18) in the quarries.

 In Dvoretz there was a family by the name of Firanka. I knew the man's father from Warsaw, he was a Hasid ,like my father, and a hatmaker. He himself spoke only Polish, and was not religious. I used to stay with them, and their home was just in front of your hospital where you were working, but nobody knew of my location. Firanka's wife worked for the "Monstrous Gestapo",or "the Engineer" as he was called. He lived with a Polish girl and she had hired this woman for tailoring and housework. Therefore , she knew a lot on the inside. She was on my list to take out soon. This woman, Firanka, told me," I don't believe we'll be here another two months." That was when I took out the medicine for Zolotov.

 Sarah, you mentioned in the book that I was whispering with a young women . I was taking her out to the forest to help care for Zolotov. I sold off my jacket, and with the money, bought medicine, "streptomycin", for the infection. I took the medicine and the young woman, Lucia ,nicknamed "Galia". I promised you I would take you on my next trip.

 I was shocked and surprised why you never asked me when you saw me enter the camp the last time why I was limping?

 Now I will explain it.

 Zolotov saw how dedicated I was to bring him medication and the nurse, and he told me," I will give you 3 or 4 people, and you will organize an "otriat"(squad) together. In some areas , you will work together, and in some, apart. We will plan to attack Molczadh( Meitchet). He assigned us a captain, Petka, to be our commander and started to teach us how to cut phone lines and how to plant mines.

 At this time, there were in the Horka forest, families that had survived the slaughter at Meitchet, and family Berkovich, that had come from Suvalki, the home town of Pinhas Sapir. The Germans had sent out older people of the town over to the Russian side, and this family had escaped before the shehitah . They were very close to my heart. He was a lawyer and she a pharmacist, with two small children, age 4-6, and their parents with them.

 The wife complained that at night a group of partisans, about 3 or 4, found them, attacked and raped her. Two of them were from another forest, but one was our own commander Petka. This happened several times. She complained, " Better that you kill me than have it happen again."

 We made an ambush. We saw Petka coming with another 2 or 3 partisans, and going to the ditch which was her hiding place. We told them " Freeze" . They shot, and we shot back and killed them. I was wounded with a bullet in the leg.

 We had saved the woman, but how were we to get the bullet out of my leg? Lucia said, " Go back to Dvoretz and let them remove it there." I told her, "Go and shoot me."

 There was another girl there, whose father was a pharmacist in Meitchet- she gave me some pills. We knew of a group of partisans from the Slonim area, from a town called Drecsyn, and we contacted them. They had a horse and buggy and were better organized, with Dr. Atlas in a small field hospital for the wounded(jamlanka- a ditch in the forest). She told us we could do it secretly and not let anyone know we killed partisans; otherwise the Russians would kill mes. " Tell only the doctor,"she said, "I'll go with you in the horse and buggy and give you the pills ." (Galia had been against killing Petka. She claimed,"You had no right to kill him.")

 We saw that some people have a heart. People took me to the forest hospital ( friendly people), and we are friends with them till now, such as Bella Bornstein, who wrote Hayaar Haya Habayit Sheli and Sonia, who later married Dr. Rakover, both of whom were nurses.

 These two took care of me like mothers. I needed to rest for months, but in my head , I was worried about my partisans and the Berkovitch family. I asked,"What should I do? " Why didn't Dr. Atlas offer anything? His philosophy was" We need the strong . The wounded can't be in my group." He sent me to a new group under Commander Abramov. In all this time, in my head, there was the question of how to take out more people from Dvoretz, when I could barely walk. I asked Dr. Atlas," Where is the group from Zhetil ( whom I had met after the massacre in June 1942, after the liquidation). They told me they have a group of partisans near Nakrizkoc( a village at the entrance of the forest)."

 Atlas told me that Ukrainians, who worked for the Nazis, had taken over Ruda Jarowskai, the center of the forest, and the group of partisans needed to attack them first. He attacked and took prisoners and killed many of them.

 Then , I asked to go to the Nakrizkoc forest, where I had friends, such as Hili Yoselevich, Myra Roznov and her sister Sarah and brother, Moshe.( Their parents were very intelligent and were active in the Bund.) I wanted to go to them. Dr. Atlas said he

 would take me, but my friends advised against it. However, I insisted, because I needed to know what had happened to my companions in the other forests.

 Dr. Atlas introduced me to Hershel Kaplinsky and his group of 50-60 youths, survivors from the Zhetil ghetto. There I met the right people, a big group of survivors from the Bielice ghetto( I called this area "Tel Aviv Street"). I started to ask them what happened. They told me," The Berkovitch family were killed in the Horka forest. Germans and Ukrainians had attacked them in the daytime and killed them. The rest of the partisans went into Dvoretz to live "Normal".

 Hershel Kaplinsky heard what I had to say, and told me" I have a cousin in Dvoretz. I want to take her out."

 "But," I said," I am wounded. I need 2 or 3 people to help me. " I had a list of people to take out--survivors from Rubzewitz ( represented by Rubzewiski), Drevna( represented by is Chodak), Naliboki,( represented by Machlis) and Lubcz( represented by Velvel Solomansky -- his sister worked with you in the hospital and was later killed). My dream was to talk to them about my plan to go into the forest.

 Hershel told me he could not find people who would go with me to Dvorezt lager. There was a rumor that the Germans were preparing to attack the forest.

 I went anyway. With my wounded leg, I slipped through 10 or 20 villages, at night, and at daytime, I slept in the mountains. I arrived in Dvoretz alone.

 You saw me limping. I was surprised why you didn't ask me what was wrong with me. You know, you asked me so many questions later on, when I was in Switzerland. I respect your memories of the partisans and you saw my mesirut nefesh ,dedication, not for profiteering or glory, just to save Jewish lives, yet I did all af al pi chen -nevertheless.

 I was disappointed with Lucia. Nobody asked me, and I had no relatives or friends in Dvoretz, just Jewish brothers and sisters. My heart was in pain.

 The night I was to take you out with the others, the police, Yosefke and Menahem( whom you mentioned in the book) took away my clothing. They knew where I was staying, with Firanka( in the home of a blacksmith).

 Nevertheless, I was ready to go, but without any chance of surviving. The police then caught me, and took me to a cellar, where there were the three Rabbis of Dvoretz, Drevne, and Naliboki.They were young Rabbis. The Drevne Rabbi had two daughters, real nurses. The Rabbis said." We need to put a Jew like you in Herem -excommunication. It is winter time, and the Gestapo has told us they know that partisans are going in and out. We have a chance to survive." The Judenrat let me go and take only 9 of my group, those who were not registered in the camp. That was the reason why I could not take you and the others .( You can find more about this in Kaganovich's book,"Einteil fun Yiden in der Partizaner Bewegung in Soviet Rusland,

p.302.) .[ The Roleof Jews in the Partisan Movement in Soviet Russia].

 I am surprised why you didn't know this account.

 Why do I write this now?

 My reason is af al pi chen [nevertheless] , I wanted to save Jewish life. I was disappointed in people like Lucia. I had no political party or movement behind me. Everything was against me- the situation, the environment. This is little more than just a letter. It is my history, my background. I don't brag about this, but I am proud of what I was doing.

 In the darkest days in our history, I survived with God's Image.

 I find now people that survived the shehitah [slaughter] from Dvoretz and I have kept in contact with them, such as the Cuckiers in Tel Aviv, the wife, the brother and brother-in-law ( Ephraim Cukier was working in the newspaper Al Hamishmar ; he was from Rubzewitz) or Machlis from Naliboki, now in Haifa. I am very surprised that these people never mentioned your name, and they knew that I was alive.

 I hope this will make clear my background in Dvoretz. I hope one day you will be able to read all of my memoirs of the forests. I survived, not only for myself , but also to help families survive and to give them at least the minimum a human being needs in those conditions.

 Please write to me your thoughts about my letter,

 Sincerely yours,

 Max Cukier

 Max CUKIER Obituary

CUKIER, Max Passed away this morning January 17, 3011, in his home. He was born on January 23, 1918 and was a Holocaust survivor, one of the last of the "Partisans - Freedom Fighters". He was one of the leading Importers on the West Coast for many years. He and his beloved wife, Miriam were very active in many charities and made Los Angeles their home for many years and raised a family here. Max is survived by his daughter, Riva, her husband Arie and his three grandchildren, Hanna, Daniel and Sarah. He is survived by his son, Jeff, his wife Vikki and his two grandchildren, Michelle and Bryant. He is also survived by his son Benny and his two children, Jason and Alex. We cherish his memory and he will be forever in our heart Services will be held at Mount Sinai-Hollywood Hills at 1:00 on Wednesday, Jan. 19, 2011.

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