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## **The Partisans of Vilna**

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1 hour, 28 minutes, 41 seconds

Speakers: Michael Bart

Transcribed by: Rachel E Lieu

[Holocaust Living History Workshop](#)

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Time      Transcription

00:00      [The Library UC San Diego]

00:04      [Michael Bart: The Partisans of Vilna]

00:04      Susanne Hillman: Spring quarter I'm very pleased to have this special speaker whom some of you know, Mr. Michael Bart. He's going to talk about the partisans of Vilna but first professor Deborah Hertz, from Judaic Studies and the Department of History, is going to provide a little introduction so we know who Mr. Bart is. Please welcome Deborah.

00:23      Deborah Hertz: Thank you, Susanne. Well, it's great to be here. I haven't been able to come to every single one of these but I'm always, I'm always here in spirit but now I'm actually here in body and in spirit. And I'm especially thrilled to introduce Michael Bart because we became familiar with this project when we had a very first luncheon for Holocaust survivors about three or four years ago. Abba Kovner is one of my great heroes, um, and I've read everything I can about the Vilna ghetto resistance - all the movies - but this will be in addition and also from a local perspective. So just as by way of introduction, Michael Bart's parents were survivors who escaped the Vilna Ghetto, became members of the partisans of Vilna with Abba Kovner's Avengers group - and if you don't know who Abba Kovner was, and you don't know who the avengers was, and you know where Vilna is - you will. It will all become clear. Um, his father was a mainline partisan fighter whose primary mission was the sabotage and destruction of Nazi trains. Uh, Bart has taken personal information and documentation from his parents, spent over ten years researching their experiences in the ghetto working with the partisans. Now, for we historians, ten years is the flick of an instant.

01:33      Deborah Hertz: If you tell a novelist - my daughter always said, well yeah, who's that woman who wrote the *Harry Potter*? You know, mom, she's turned out ten books while you're still on chapter two. What is with that? For us, ten years is a very brief amount of time. Uh, his book *Until Our Last Breath: A Holocaust Story of Love and Partisan Resistance* was published by St. Martin's Press in 2008. It was honored as a 2009 Christopher Award winner. The gala black tie event in New York City, is this part of the costume now, for tonight? I'm sure you look great um, um, and uh, uh, other winners of the Christopher Award, Steven Spielberg, um, for the *Pianist* and, uh, for *Schindler's List*. Oh yeah, that was pointed out to me, and that was a mistake, um, and Eli Wiesel in the adult book category. Um, I would also like to introduce Mr. Bart's wife, Bonnie, who's played a very, very important role in his filming - and I guess we're being doubly filmed here. Um, so it's with great, great um enthusiasm that I introduce Mr. Michael Bart.

02:44      Michael Bart: Can you hear me okay? I'm going to be moving around because I'm going to be doing a Powerpoint presentation. Um, I'll be speaking probably a little

over an hour, and then if you could hold any questions that you might have and I'll answer anything that you'd like to know. The first question I'm going to ask everybody here, could I see a show of hands of anybody in here who have seen the *Defiance* movie, the one with Daniel Craig playing? Um, okay, interesting. I, I will tell you where the similarities between the *Defiance* film and my parent's story, and some of them will surprise you. I'll tell you where the *Defiance* film is accurate, where it's maybe a little bit movie-ized, and I'll kind of go over that. When I, when we speak about the term Vilna we're talking today Vilnius, Lithuania, which is one of the Baltic countries. If you go, you have the Scandinavian countries, and you have the small Baltic Sea, right on the other side - about the same the same altitude, or latitude - is the three Baltic countries. So when I speak about Vilna, I'm speaking today Vilnius, Lithuania.

04:03 Michael Bart: Growing up as a second generation the thing that had the biggest impact on my life was, happened before I was born. Because of the Holocaust, I've never had aunts and uncles, grandparents, first cousins. They were all killed. And so, that was something that I dealt with from, from every minute of my life. My parents experienced a lot during the war. They didn't speak an extraordinary amount about their experiences. I don't know if it was because they didn't want to burden us with the pain of their past, or whether or not they just didn't want to speak about it. With two exceptions - my dad always spoke about being a partisan fighter, and what he was doing. He was sabotaging and blowing up Nazi trains because he was really proud of that. My mother spoke often about where she was from, which is Vilna because she was proud of her upbringing. How I, I basically dealt with the Holocaust growing up is, I didn't have a choice; it was part of my life. When people would talk about me when I was in high school I was Mike Bart, pretty good basketball player, nice guy, parents are Holocaust survivors. The problem with that is, I was different than everybody else. I didn't have grandparents. I didn't have aunts and uncles. I didn't have cousins. And the one thing you really didn't like growing up is being different than everybody else. You wanted to be the same and unfortunately I didn't have that option. What I did was, when I got to college I changed my narrative. And what I mean by that when I say I changed my narrative is, I know, I went to San Diego State, I - all of a sudden - I was Mike Bart, pretty good basketball player, pretty good guy, but I didn't tell a soul my parents were Holocaust survivors. It wasn't that I was ashamed; it was that I didn't want the whole world to know.

05:54 Michael Bart: And I got along very well. I was president of the largest fraternity in San Diego State. Not one person in the fraternity knew I, my parents were survivors. And again, and that worked for me, and, and I blocked out the Holocaust for the most part. I - it caused me so much pain and my parents so much pain - that I didn't really watch Holocaust films. I didn't want to read about the Holocaust. I didn't want to talk about the Holocaust. But you know, I went to the organization of survivors in San Diego, New Life Club, when they had an activity that my mom

wanted me to go to. And so, what happened is, I was getting along really well. Something happened at my dad's funeral, somebody went up to me. There were a lot of people I didn't know who they were, and somebody went up to me and said, Michael, you need to inscribe Freedom Fighters of Nakama on your father's gravestone. Number one, I didn't know who this man was. He didn't identify himself. Number two, I didn't know what he was talking about and I said, could you repeat that? And he goes, Freedom Fighters of Nakama. And then I got distracted and by the time I turned back, I realized he was gone and I didn't get a clarification. But I got busy and I was keeping an eye on my mom, who was ill. And afterwards, I got home and I started digging through my dad's papers. And I found out Nakama was the partisan means revenge in Hebrew or avenge, and it was the name of the partisan group that was led by Abba Kovner during the war and Abba Kovner was a close friend of my parents. My parents, affectionately note, call him his commander, their commander because they were really proud. And so I found out that nakama, and all of a sudden that started getting my, my interest and my attention. Although I was going to need a lot more for me to move on to this project because the Holocaust was still a painful subject for me.

- 07:56 Michael Bart: So I had heard that the Museum of Tolerance, up in Los Angeles, was recently given a whole lot of information, photos, documents from Vilna. So my wife and I go up there, and I'm meeting with an archivist, and we spent two or three hours with a really amazing archivist, and we had gotten nothing that would help me. And then, all of a sudden she said, I got one more box if you want to look through it. And the first thing I'm thinking is, I'm hungry; I want to go have lunch. And Bonnie says, of course, we'll look at it. And so, we looked at it. We've taken out the papers and the photos, saw nothing. Get to the bottom of the box and I see a photo. I find this photo. Okay, the first thing I noticed is that's Abba Kovner, who's the leader of the partisans of Vilna, and then I look over here, and there's my dad, and there's my mom holding a rifle. Oh, can you turn the lights down, possibly turn them off?
- 08:54 Cameraman: Well, I still need to film you though.
- 08:56 Michael Bart: Oh, sorry
- 08:58 Audience: [unclear] That's better.
- 09:03 Michael Bart: Is that a problem for you, or a? What's better for you folks?
- 09:08 Audience: Dark is better.
- 09:10 Michael Bart: It's all PowerPoint, sorry.
- 09:15 Cameraman: No problem.
- 09:16 Michael Bart: Sorry about that. Is that okay Deborah?

09:18 Deborah Hertz: [unclear]

09:20 Michael Bart: Okay, that's Abba Kovner. There's my dad and there's my mom. Now imagine going into a place knowing your father, uh, was a partisan fighter, because that's the only part of the Holocaust he always talked about, because he was proud. He was proud of what he did. He was proud of making a difference. He was proud of blowing up trains, and what they were doing. And my mom just talked about being from Vilna because she was proud of her family and her upbringing, and I'll get to that later. So that made me want to continue my research more, and more, and more. What happened is, I had a, I had a cousin on the East Coast who said her father was, was dying - he's 98 years old - and if I wanted to see him, I needed to get out there right away. So Bonnie and I flew out there. He's in a convalescent home. He lived a week after we were there. Hadn't seen him in 25, 30 years, the first thing he said to me is, are you going to write a book about your parents' Holocaust experiences? And I hadn't even thought about it, hadn't entered my mind, and then he started - for the next two or three hours - telling me all these amazing stories. It turns out, when my parents came to the US [United States], and they were living on the East Coast, he was the person that my parents - my father specifically - relied on to tell about his experiences, specifically life in the ghetto fighting with the, fighting with the partisans. And so, he was telling me all these amazing stories, and so then, that's getting me more and more energized into learning more and learning more. The next thing I did is I decided hey, I found an old phone book. Let me go through this phone book and let's look at these numbers, mostly on the East Coast, and see if I can find somebody who can help me. I call a name and a number, and I ask for a gentleman, and the lady who answered said, I'm sorry he's not here. Can I say whose calling? And I said, my name is Michael Bart and I wanted to call him and tell him that my dad had just passed away. And she said, well you know, he'd like to speak with you. Definitely, he'll be home tonight. Could you call after five? And I said I would. And she says he knows a lot about your family's background.

11:33 Michael Bart: That's all she said, and then I called him that night. And not only did he know my parents very well, he was - along with his family - in prison in the same ghetto room together with my mom, and her mother, brother, and grandmother. There were ten of them forced in one room, and they were living there a long time. So he was my eyes and ears to the ghetto because he literally was forced, for two years, living in the same room together with my mom and her family. The next thing I decided is I need to go to Vilnius, Lithuania, or Vilna. I need to get there. I need to find out, see what I can find out, what's there. And so, I hired a, got a hold of the Jewish community out there, and I hired a researcher guide who was going to take me around. I said, I want to see any remnants of the old ghetto, but more importantly, I want to get out to the woods where the partisans were fighting. And first thing I'll tell you about the *Defiance* - when I asked you, who's seen the *Defiance* - the *Defiance* group, the Bielski, they were 90 miles

away from the partisans of Vilna, and they were in what's countries today Belarus, Bela-Russia. And they're very hostile today to the US. They have a very acrimonious relationship. So for the *Defiance* film, they weren't able to shoot on location, location.

12:58 Michael Bart: So where did they shoot? They shot on location where my parents were. So when you see the *Defiance* film that's the Rudnicki Forest where my parents were. So that's the first little thing I'll tell you about, about that. And the other big major difference, and I know I'll get into the partisans later, is the Bielski people in *Defiance*, they were trying to save people. They were trying to save young people, old people. They just wanted to save Jews from dying, where the partisans of Vilna were a little different, and I'll get to that. So, I go on, I've got my first trip planned. I got a guide and the guide says to me via email the day before I'm leaving, I have a surprise for you. And I had already had so many surprises, and each surprise energized me because I was the reluctant warrior. You know, I wasn't one who was really embracing the Holocaust. It wasn't that easy for me. So she picks me up at the airport, and she's got this lady in her van with her, and she's about this big. She's really darling. She was about 85 when, when I met her. It turns out not only was she born and raised on the same street as my mom, but she was one of the partisan fighters with the partisans of Vilna which, of the partisans of Vilna two-thirds were men and one-third were women. And the women did very important things.

14:17 Michael Bart: So, and I'll get to that later, but not only - she basically slept in the same underground bunker right next to my mom and dad for a year. So all of a sudden, you know, you talk about historians, I'm basically finding people that - all around the world because Bonnie and I were traveling all around the world interviewing and meeting with people, and everywhere I go I would get another contact to find. And that was really what was energizing us. So we, we spend a lot of time with Fania [Jocheles-Brancovski]. She, we got out to the woods where they were. The bunkers are still there - the underground bunkers - and I'll show you the pictures of the bunkers. They're still there. She, we went in the bunkers with her. She was showing us exactly where they slept. She, we spent almost a week there on our first trip. So then, when I came back, I had information galore. And then I'm contacting people all over the world, and there was a gentleman in Israel named Joseph Harmatz. In Israel, he's very well-known and respected, because he's a legendary partisan fighter and he was also an educator. He was the the chairman of World ORT [Organization for Rehabilitation through Training], the educational organization. So, he's really into education, really into Holocaust education.

15:34 Michael Bart: Anyway, so Joe and I have been talking all the time about what, and about what was going on because he was always assigned to go out with my dad on train sabotage missions. So he knew exactly how long it took to get out there, what they accomplished, what their, what their, what - and I'll get into that when I

get into that part of it. So, Joe knew I had been to Vilna the first time, and we did - Bonnie and I - decided, you know, we're getting so much information that we feel we needed to go back. We just felt like there was more there, and so we, we just, we planned a trip the following summer to go back out there. And I was going to call Joe in Israel and tell him I'm going, but I had heard that he just went in for open-heart surgery about a month before. And I, I thought to myself, he's in his 80s. Do I really want to tell him after heart surgery that I'm going back? Maybe it's time for me just to, you know, to do it on my own, and maybe I'll call them down the road. So Bonnie and I go back to, uh, to Vilna - Vilnius, Lithuania - and we're walking through the remnants of the old ghetto, and I hear - and Bonnie's doing what she always does, filming - and I hear a kind of a raspy voice that sounded familiar to me, and he was with a big group of people, and I thought it was a tour guide.

16:57 Michael Bart: But the voice sounded familiar, and he was right in front of the old ghetto Judenraete - where the the Jewish headquarters were in the ghetto - and I'm hearing this voice, and I'm getting closer and closer, and all of a sudden like a switch went off I recognize the voice, and I'm yelling at Bonnie. I go, Bonnie come here, and she's waving me off because she's filming, you know, she doesn't listen to me anymore. And then, all, I get, I realized, I go, Bonnie come here. And she's waving me off. She's not listening to me, and finally, I just yelled, and she realized there's something going on. I went into the group that was getting the tour, and I went up to the the person who was there, and I said, Joseph? And he said - he's got this raspy voice - yes. And I go, do I sound familiar to you? And he goes, no. And I go, I speak to you all the time in Israel. And all of a sudden, everybody in his group, his tour group, all their heads turn because they're thinking, who is this guy? And I said I'm Michael Bart. And he broke down so emotionally because number one, I look like my dad, number two, what is the possibility that somebody who had been helping me for months - who used to go on train sabotage missions with my dad - that I would go 8,000 miles away and I would run into him at the old ghetto in Vilnius, Lithuania. Stunning.

18:24 Michael Bart: At the same trip there was another partisan fighter, who was visiting from Israel as well, named Motl Gurwitz. Motl used to always go out on train missions with my dad, and now - I don't know if I can swear in front of this group - but they had a nickname. He had a nickname for my dad. I'll, I'll clean it up. They had a Yiddish term they called him - no BS. But, I won't, you know, but they'd call it to him, in Yiddish. And they were telling me that some of the partisan fighters were, you know, they were, they, they would kind of get off on, get into some areas they could get into trouble. They were more hot-headed, where your dad was really cool, and whenever they got assigned to a partisan mission with him they were really pleased. Now this gentleman, here is another funny story. This happened after my book was published. I'm speaking in New York City; I got 300 people and I can't see anybody because it's too dark. I'm speaking at YIVO

[Institute for Jewish Research], at their annual celebration - I was their keynote - and all of a sudden they showed the partisan photo that you saw earlier, and somebody stands up in the middle and goes, I was with that group. And I couldn't see who it was, and I asked him his name, and turns out afterwards I was going to spend some time talking to him.

19:40 Michael Bart: Well he, number one, grew up next door to my mother in Vilna. He was in the Vilna ghetto with them. He was a partisan. He was a young, the youngest partisan, so he didn't go on the missions like the mainline fighters. What he did is, he was eye- eyewitness to everything because he was holding the horses. He was watching the guns. He was a sentry. And so, he knows more than any of the partisans that I spoke to combined, because he was the eyewitness to everything. So that's basically a short version of my research. After all these - there's a term in Yiddish called *besheret* - when all these things were happening. So then it told me that I had something I needed to do, and I needed to put the whole story together and start getting to them. My father grew up in a town called Hrubieshov. It was in Poland. It was very antisemitic, but there was there was a different flavor in the antisemitism where my mother was than where my dad was. Where my mother was is completely different because it was closer to the Russia, and that brought the complications there. But where my dad was antisemitism was 100 percent generation to generation.

21:01 Michael Bart: It was passed on generation to generation. It was coming from the churches and until 1935 the National Government in Poland was very decent to the Jews under President [Józef Piłsudski] Piłsudski. He was very decent. There was no Jew who would complain about the Piłsudski Administration. He died and then the Endecja Party took over, a very right-wing, antisemitic party in Poland, and they thought Hitler had all the right ideas. He was right. Their, their mantra was Poland this for Poles; Jews out. Well, there's a problem there. The first one is, you have over three million. Number one, many of them have been there for hundreds of years. This is not like, uh, the, the battles that we have in the US with, on different sides with immigration - illegal, legal. These are people who were there for hundreds of years. So they're not, these are not new people to the area. They were Jews that have been there for, for dozens and dozens of generations. But their mantra was this is Poland; Jews out. What they did is they made it impossible for the Jews to work, to have businesses, or to go to school. So what are you going to do? There's, there was no hope. So most of the Jewish youth got involved in the Zionist movement.

22:20 Michael Bart: Now Zionism, Zionism today sometimes is used in a pejorative way where if they don't like something Israel does, they're going to say, well that's the Zionist government. Zionism for the Jews in Europe was very simple. What it was is, it was a hope that they could go somewhere, find a homeland where they could live in dignity and peace. And so, most of them felt going back to their traditional



homeland was the best place for them to go. And so, where Zionism today has a different adjective it's, it's different than it was then. It was very simple then. They just wanted to find a peaceful place to live. Well, there were two main Zionist movements in his hometown. One of them was the Hashomer Hatzair which my dad was in - they were more into learning how to live on the, live in farms, living out in the open, and farming. The Betar movement was more militaristic. They were more into militaristic training. And um, ironically the Hashomer group is what in today Israel became the Labor Party. The Betar is what, in today's Israel, became Likud and more, and so, that'll kind of tell you a little bit. My father, pictured right here, that's when he first joined the Zionist movement. He eventually spent three years at an agricultural training kibbutz learning farming. He ended up being an instructor, teaching other people. That's my dad, here, a little bit older at part of his - So, his upbringing, they were so poor in his hometown they were either poor or more poor. There was no indoor plumbing, so that tells you, you know, the life they had. There was nothing.

24:16 Speaker 1: Where was the kibbutz?

24:19 Michael Bart: Uh, the kibbutz was in Poland. Now historically, there was a Non-Aggression Pact signed by the foreign ministers of Germany and the Soviet Union, [Vyacheslav Mikhailovich] Molotov and von Ribbentrop [Joachim] von Ribbentrop. Europe was in shock because these are mortal enemies, and nobody could understand why they would do that. Well, there was a reason. They carved up Europe, and the Germans made a deal with the Soviets that we will take Europe up to what's known as the Bug River, which is right here. And the Soviets would take it on the other side of the Bug River, here, all the way including the Baltic States. Well, my dad and his family, their hometown was right on the Bug River. But they were on the German side, and within days - within probably eight days of the Non-Aggression Pact - the Soviet Union, excuse me, the Nazis invaded my dad's hometown. And within days, they were rounding up the Jews.

25:19 Michael Bart: So my father and all his Zionist friends fled behind Russian lines, figuring it would be safer there, and then they ended up heading toward Vilna. This is a photo that I love on a postcard that's about 80, 90 years old. But when Bonnie and I went there - we were on that hill here - and if you look at it, nothing's changed. It's, some of the buildings have been painted, but it's just absolutely amazing when you can see a 90-year-old photo and nothing has changed. It was amazing to us. My mom grew up in a completely different environment, very upper-middle-class family, owned businesses, owned a lot of property. They had rental property. They had, you know, staff in their households. That was my mother's real father who died when he, when she was really young. There's my mom. That's her mother. That's her brother Michael, my namesake. That was her stepfather who she was raised with as a, as a child, and as a young adult. Her growing up, she went to private schools. They had money, they had - Antisemitism

was there, but it was a different flavor completely than from my father's hometown. And the flavor there was number one, the Lithuanians and the Poles in the area were very anti-communist, and they were very anti the Soviet Union. And they basically said that the Jews had their fingerprints on communism because four or five of the original 14 were Jews.

26:54 Michael Bart: Okay, so they blame, you know, they blame the Jews. Those who are saying, well the Jews are all communists. So A there was antisemitism there, B, it was coming from the churches, and C, probably the biggest error in their area was the Jews accounted for 30 percent of the population in Vilna. They owned 80 to 90 percent of the businesses and the property. So there was economic envy because a lot of the Jews pushed education, sounds familiar, and they became more successful. And they realized how to run businesses, and so there was economic envy going on in Vilna, which made it a lot more complicated. So it's a different flavor of antisemitism, but it's the same antisemitism. My mother's mother, my or her grandmother, owned this whole building, and on the top floor there, there were nine apartment units. A lot of the family lived in them, and the others they rented. The lower floor they had an interesting business - and especially in this huge back area - they had a hanging grain business, and they had had it for, for decades. They were dealing with the Czarist Army that many years ago, because droskie, like this, used to go into this archway. And in the back, there was an enormous field with sheds where the horses would be fed. So that, my family had this business, and they owned the whole building. That's actually my grandmother, or my great-grandmother, my mother's grandmother who owned the building. And that's all my mom's aunts and uncles.

28:26 Michael Bart: Now, the only reason I'm showing you this synagogue is, prior to the Nazi invasion, there were 108 in Vilna. After the Nazis were done, there were one, and it was this one. And the only reason it lasted is they used it for a supply depot that happened to be right around the corner, here, from when and that's happened to be the Zawalna Temple that my mom's family went to, but 107 were taken out. The Germans broke the Non-Aggression Pact. The only one who was surprised in Europe was Stalin and literally and nobody, he had, the Germans had put a million troops - a million troops - on the border of the Soviet Union installing what, couldn't believe that he was going to invade. Well, sure enough, he did. He broke the Non-Aggression Pact. Two days later he was in Vilna, and this is a German tank on Zawalna Street, on the same street where my parents, my mother lived, and they had their businesses, and the church, and the, and the synagogue was. Now the Lithuanian, the local Lithuanians, immediately started cooperating with the Germans. Why? Number one, they, they hated the Soviet Union. They thought they'd be better with the Nazis. Two, they were antisemitic, so - and they knew the Germans were antisemitic - so they had a natural ally. And so, they immediately started collaborating and doing for the Germans what the Germans wanted them exactly to do.

29:56 Michael Bart: What happened is Lithuanians, uh, Lithuanian, bands of Lithuanians were working for the Germans. The Germans said, we want you to start getting Jewish men and round them up - including my mom's stepfather, who was taken away for one day's work supposedly, never to be seen again. But what they were doing is they were, as they were taking all these men away, the Lithuanians were shooting them in these big pits about five miles from Vilna called Ponary where, these were former oil pits that were built by the, the Soviet Union. There they were using them to kill the Jews. So the Germans had given them orders, we want to thin the Jewish population, and the Lithuanians were collaborating with them. Now, the Germans - to their credit - have acknowledged what happened in the Holocaust. They've tried to make reparations. They, they're still making reparations financially to the survivors. They have been, you know, they, they realized there was evil that went on. They haven't denied a thing. Um, what the Lithuanians have tried to muddy history. Where they don't want to acknowledge what they did. They'll say that, well maybe a couple people did it but generally, the reality is, and they denied all the Jews that were killed by them at Ponary. But something happened that changed the rules of the game, and that is, a diary was found.

31:29 Michael Bart: And it was found right outside Ponary at a farm that was occupied by a non-Jew who literally had a view of everything that was going on, and he kept the diary. He buried it and it was found and it was published 2005 by Yale University and then basically - his name is Kazimierz Sakowitz - and you say the word Sakowitz diary now in Lithuania, and they just kind of grit their teeth, because for many, for the longest time, they were denying that they had any part in it until the Sakowicz diary was, was found. And then basically, then the truth came out that 35,000 Jews were shot between July and September of [19]41. There's a reason I'm telling you those dates because the ghetto was formed right in September of [19]41. The Germans in an order to Lithuanians, get rid of as many Jews as you can, mostly men, so - and they were, what they were, did, is they killed 35,000. Ultimately 100,000 Jews were killed. Excuse me, 100,000 people were killed in Ponary; 70,000 were Vilna's Jews. Vilna was the highest kill rate of any city in Europe; 97 percent of the Jews in Vilna were killed. They were, I think originally, 70-75 000; 2,500 lived. The Sakowitz diary was huge because all of a sudden you can't, uh, do re-revisionist history which, they still do.

33:02 Michael Bart: They, but they, what they try to do - even today - I hate to say this, is they basically say, well there was a lot of bad that went on, but we suffered under the Soviet Union when they took us over after the war. So that's kind of like saying, well you know I robbed the bank, but afterwards, you know, everybody suffered because of this, and that, or the other. So it was, it was something that they still are having a difficult time doing. Well, I love this photo. This is Vilna about 100 years ago. This building here is today the best hotel in Vilna it's the Radisson-Astoria. Bonnie and I stayed there twice, but what's interesting about this is, right behind this building here, is the old Vilna ghetto, and it's still pretty much intact.

And this is the All Saints Church. It's a Catholic church that was literally right across the street from where the Vilna ghetto is, and, you know, people would be going to church on Sunday and they would be seeing the Jews imprisoned in the ghetto which, you know, is something that, it's just difficult sometimes to deal with.

34:04 Michael Bart: The Jews were forced on September 6, [19]41 into the ghetto. They were given 20 minutes' notice. Pack a bag, you're going into the ghetto. Now I have to tell you, growing up I had no vision of what a ghetto was. I thought a ghetto was an area where they pushed all the Jews, but I had no idea of really what it was. What this was, an area where 3,000 Jews had lived and then they forced in 35,000. Where my parents were, when they first got in there, they basically - oh well, I'll get to that in the next slide. But this is the entrance to the ghetto. There were two side gates that were always locked, but this was the entrance to the ghetto. On the outside, you always had Lithuanians, who were their overseers. You had the Jewish police on the inside, and then on the, uh, the Germans were coming around all day long, spot-checking what was going on. What did, what did it mean to be pushed into a ghetto? For my mom and her family initially, until they were - the Germans were - killing people off, there were a hundred people in a two-bedroom, one-bath apartment. Imagine, two bedroom, one bath, 100 people.

35:22 Michael Bart: Eventually that numbers went down because the Germans didn't have any intention of keeping that many people on the ghetto. They originally started with 35; they wanted 10 or less. So what they did is they were rationing food. You got about 300 to 400 calories a day. Not enough to kill you, but enough - you had plenty of water - but enough where you were always hungry. And it was very dangerous to smuggle food into the ghetto because they were forcing the Jews to go out and work outside the ghetto in forced labor six days a week. But there was an underground building, and I'll get to that. But it was very difficult with food. They were working you 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. Survival was difficult because if you didn't have a work permit, which was called a *Schein*, which entitled you to food and entitled you to live. Then the Germans were constantly going through the ghetto, with the Lithuanians, and they were doing the *Aktions*, the roundups. And then they were killing, taking them out to the Ponary and killing all the Jews. So if you didn't have a work *Schein* or work permit you - and then a lot of people say, why didn't they escape? Escape to what? The woods were, you know, five, ten miles away, but everybody in the area was either antisemitic or would collaborate because the Germans made it worth their while.

36:43 Michael Bart: So if you turned in a Jew they get, they would get money. So either people who were antisemitic did it willingly, or people who, you know, needed food because it was tough times for everybody. They were easily turning in Jews. So there was no hope. There was no escape. That's the gentleman here who lived in the ghetto. This picture was taken after the war, together with my mom. This is the

entrance to the place, and it's not that big of a place, and when I say - and Bonnie and I were in there - I, it felt bigger than a typical two bedroom, one bed, or a bathroom apartment. But it was a small place, and I couldn't imagine. People were sleeping literally like sardines. It's an amazing story. Well, what happened is my mom became - everybody had to work - my mom worked in a thing called the Lost Gathering Point. What it was, it was where Germans who were displaced from their units would come back, and spend a few days, and get healed up if they were wounded, eat, get new uniforms and they'd go back out to battle. And so that's where this was here. My mom worked there. They did anything they told her to do, whether it was laundry, cooking, cleaning.

37:52 Michael Bart: She, ironically, worked for somebody who was really good to her, and he was good to everybody who worked for him, and he ended up being a righteous gentile from Yad Vashem. And the Germans found out that he was treating the Jews with respect and they put 17 bullets in him, and so he ended up becoming a righteous gentile from Yad Vashem. But that's where she worked. That's Anton Schmidt, who is Austrian and he just didn't think it was right what was going on to the Jews. He tried to make a difference and the Gestapo finished him off with 17 bullets. This is the Judenrat building. This is where you line up every morning to get your *Schein*. Without a *Schein* you're subject to this, the Gestapo's being there, like getting all the, the Jews, taking them - with the Lithuanians - to Ponary and shooting them. And ultimately, there were 70,000 Jews. They killed 35,000 before the ghetto. They had 35 in the ghetto; they wanted 10,000 only in the ghetto. So they were doing the roundups killing off all the Jews.

39:03 Michael Bart: Now my mom worked at the Lost Gathering Point. What did my dad do? Interesting, when I was doing my research everybody was very vague about what my dad did. Uh, I couldn't, I didn't understand it. Somebody said he was an official of the Judenrat and I go, okay what did that mean? And then somebody else said, you know, and as I go from one to the other, but they would all tell me the same thing. Until my mom, my dad just, uh, I'll go backwards just to tell you the end. Every one of his relatives was killed in Europe. You know, I've never seen a photo of my grandparents, or I don't know what they look like. My mom lost every relative except, in Europe, except for one cousin. That cousin is in Israel and I said to her, what did my dad do in the ghetto? And she said, oh he was a ghetto policeman. But, she said, he was very kind and he worked for the underground. And then, as I started going back to all the partisans who knew my dad, I said, was my dad a ghetto policeman? They said, yeah. And I said, was he a good guy or, you know he was, you know - because the ghetto policemen have a spotty record - and they go, if he wasn't a good guy, we would, he would have been dead. We would have killed him. We killed all the bad power at all the ghetto policemen after Vilna was liquidated, or after it was liberated, later on. And so, it turns out that Joe Harmatz - the one I met by accident - was involved with the underground. He and my dad were coordinating getting weapons in the ghetto.

40:34 Michael Bart: And so then, one by one, everybody was telling me about what they were doing. He was working. There were about four or five people for the ghetto underground that I'll tell you about who were smuggling. That's my dad right there. We found this photo accidentally after the book was published. And then there's a photo here with my dad being a sergeant at the ghetto gate. This one we had for the book. This one, when I got that photo I almost fell over. I mean imagine you, you grow up and this stuff is just amazing. So this is the ghetto police. The ghetto police were broken into three in Vilna. There were, some of them who got who just got sucked into a job that they didn't know what to do and they had to just survive because the Germans and Lithuanians were collaborating. There were others that were involved with the resistance and there were others that were just harsh and they were bad people probably like a lot of the other ghettos.

41:28 Michael Bart: Abba Kovner, friend of my father's from the - he was a, the, he was the head of the Hashem the Hashomer Hatzair Zionist movement in Vilna. And my father was, you know, a lifelong member - ever since he was 13 years old. So Abba was his friend. Abba Kovner, what happened is somebody was shot at Ponary, and the Germans, or the Lithuanians, missed a gal, a person, who was a young person, and they did it. And then she woke up. She had no clothes on. She raced back to Vilna and she told the underground what was going on in Vilna or, excuse me, on Ponary. She told Abba Kovner. Abba Kovner called for a meeting of all youth, as many who would come. Three hundred people came and he gave a famous speech where he said, don't believe Hitler is not in stories. They intend to kill all the Jews from Europe. Let us not let us not go like sheep to slaughter. Let us fight until our last breath. That's the name of my book.

42:38 Michael Bart: So Abba Kovner saw it early on that Hitler intends to kill all the Jews from Europe. The resistance was broken down into two groups: there were 300 people - ironically - each group had 150. These three gentlemen here were the leaders of the, uh, of one of the groups, the FPO [Fareynikte Partizaner Organizatsye]. And this gentleman here, Yechiel Scheinbaum, was a leader of another. The fundamental difference is when they say, communist. The communists that the Jews, the life that they lived there was really more of a socialist without religion. They didn't care about religion but they, they didn't want to be dominated by the government - but they just wanted everybody taken care of. The socialists were a little bit more, a little bit different than the socialism that they talked about today where they do more like a kibbutz living in Israel. So what happened is these three were in one. They thought that Hitler was going to kill all the Jews, so let's die fighting. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising had already happened and they were starting to get a build up a nice supply of weapons. They wanted to do a Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in Vilna. These three did.

43:56 Michael Bart: Yechiel Scheinbaum did not. He was older. He was a little bit, um, he was looking at things a little differently. He was thinking, let's try to get out to the

forest and make a difference out in the forest. My father, ironically, was friendly with both sides because he was friends with Abba Kovner but he had a lot of people who were involved with Yechiel Scheinbaum and his group. And so, my father saw both sides of, you know, making a difference. But my father, in the back of his mind, was thinking about his family, about his mom and dad that he left, about his brother, about his sister. And so, he was naturally more oriented toward getting out to the woods. These gentlemen wanted to fight it out in the Vilna ghetto. My dad there, he met my mom at a Zionist meeting. That's her cousin who survived in Israel. That's my mom. This is in the Vilna ghetto. They were having a meeting at, and my mom was in the Betar Zionist group but she wasn't super serious about it, or my dad was a Hashomer Hatzair who was very serious about it. They met; they became friends. Um, they developed a courtship.

45:07 Michael Bart: Now, I don't, you know, it's hard for me to imagine, even to this day, because my mom was very naive and she probably, and my dad was very shy. So, how they could get a courtship going in the Vilna ghetto, but they did. They became friends. They were together as much as they could and they ended up getting married 90 days before the liquidation of the ghetto by the last remaining rabbi in the ghetto because they both made a decision. My dad had made a decision he wanted to get out to the woods and try to fight with the resistance movement group that wanted to get out to the woods and my mom wanted to go with him. So my dad met her family, which he says was an interesting experience because, you know, she came from a high-class family - you know, very wealthy - and he came dirt poor and they didn't even like his accent. So it was, you know, my dad kind of joked. He goes, did you ever see the movie *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* And I said, yeah. He goes, he had it easy. So basically, here's what happened. September 1st [19]43 - all of a sudden they stopped the Jewish work parties and the ghetto was surrounded by the Lithuanians and some Germans.

46:24 Michael Bart: And so the Jews knew time might have been up. And so basically, Abba Kovner tried to get all the people in the ghetto to do an uprising, and the people in the ghetto were against it because they thought that we're too close to the, to the Red Army; they're too powerful. The Americans got, have to be around and we'll get saved. Why should we die? And they believed, and they fundamentally knew, that the Red Army would, eventually was going to make a difference, and that was their hope, and Yechiel Scheinbaum never wanted to do an uprising. Abba Kovner did. What happened on September 1st the, a number of collaborators for the, uh, the Germans - I think they were the Latvians, the Estonians - Bonnie is my historian here, and the Estonians, who were collaborating with the Germans, they went into the ghetto because they had heard a rumor that there were weapons in there. And they went on the street and an armed confrontation, uh, ensued. And the one person who didn't want to be involved in an armed confrontation, because he wanted to get out to the woods,

was killed, and that was really tragic. But what that told Abba Kovner is two things: you either get out or there's no hope.

47:43 Michael Bart: And the Jews are not going to fight in the ghetto. They're not going to die because they believe in the Red Army, that they're going to come. And so basically, my mom was walking through the ghetto with her mother and brother who got a work assignment outside the ghetto as - actually got it through the ghetto administration, through my dad's help - working in this thing called HKP [labor camp] where they were repairing military vehicles. And obviously, my mom's mother and her brother probably wouldn't be doing it, but they were going to be doing maintenance, food, whatever, but they were, they were being transferred there and my mom walked to the ghetto gate with them. They were taken out to the ghetto gate and then brought to HKP. My mom was picked up by German soldiers in the ghetto, along with other Jews, and taken - in a round-up - and brought over here to the ghetto prison. And my mom went up to a German soldier and said, I can work, I can work. And uh, the German soldier hit my mom on the head with the butt of his rifle. She hit the fence there, and back down, and hit the cobblestone, and she was out. And when my mom woke up, she didn't know how long but she had a major concussion, everybody in the courtyard that she came in with was shot, and she was the only one that was alive.

49:09 Michael Bart: And so, she got back to where the underground was, found my dad, and then they realized, we have to get out. Fortunately, the underground was tied in with the ghetto administration because a lot of them were there, and they got access to a side door key that could get some of them out through the ghetto. They started getting out in various ways, through the side of the ghetto, and just - get out. It's better than dying in there. My dad and mom left with Shlomo Brand and Dr. Leon Bernstein. Leon Bernstein had bribed a Lithuanian driver to take them to the outskirts of, of the city, but nobody really knew if he was going to turn you in for money. So it was really risky but they got out. Seventy members of the underground had got out prior to the ghetto being liquidated - 70 members, there were 300 total. Well, what happened is the Nazis decided to liquidate the ghetto. So other members of the underground wanted to get out, including Abba Kovner, and there's no way out. So what he did is he led 80 members through the sewers for four to six hours. And when I say sewer, the sewer is there you can walk through these sewers - although you're walking neck deep in stuff you don't want to walk in - you're wading and it was awful. They spent four to six hours. This is the manhole that they got into, and this is the street that they went in. There's obviously Abba Kovner, and they basically, so 150 members of the underground got out of Vilna.

50:44 Michael Bart: Now weapons, they had 150 members; they had 28 weapons. That's it. They're not going to stop the Nazi Army. They get out to the Rudniki forest and when I - you know, I guess I was just naive growing up - when I asked my dad,



why didn't the Germans just go in and kill all you guys? And they go because the forest was too thick. We were too deep in, and it was too many swamps, and they couldn't get any mechanized forces - they could only go in two by two, and when they did, we picked them all off - and so, the Germans didn't touch us. And when I first - I went there twice with Bonnie - the first thing I, I was stunned because it's such a swampy area. There were millions of mosquitoes and Bonnie and I are walking around with trash bags over our heads with the eyes cut out because otherwise you couldn't, you couldn't be out there. And what I was told by a lot of the partisans is the mosquitoes, within a couple days, didn't bother you.

51:46 Michael Bart: You became part of the forest and then they didn't even bother you. So what you had to do initially is, you had to put on gasoline all over your body - to use that as insect repellent - and then eventually, believe it or not, the mosquitoes didn't bother you. Which is, I have, I find it hard to believe but I was told that by five different people who were out there, so I believe that. I thought, growing up, I imagines a small little forest and, you know, you go in there and play. This forest was hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of miles. And if you take a wrong turn, you'll never be seen again. It was a very primeval forest, and that's the word that I got from Abba Kovner's wife, Vitka. She called it a primeval forest. Well, when they got out there the first thing is there was antisemitism, you know, it hadn't gone away. There were 300 Russian partisans out there. The 300 Russian partisans, what they were is, they were Russians who either got displaced from their units or they were AWOL [Absent without Official Leave], or they were, they escaped, or whatever, but they were basically hiding out there.

52:31 Michael Bart: The Russians had armed them but they really didn't want to fight. They wanted to get home. They weren't, they didn't love Stalin. They hated Hitler but they loved their family, and they didn't really want to die. And so, they were the least motivated partisans you'll ever find, the 300 Russian partisans. But they were, you know, they didn't take the Jews seriously. The Jews asked them for weapons and they thought the Jews, you're just coming out here for a vacation. We're not going to give you nothing. And so, the first thing the Jews needed was shelter because the Baltic winters are 20 below zero at night. So they built, for the partisans of Vilna and Abba Kovner's unit, which was 108 members, they built six of underground bunkers - dugout bunkers - where about 20 to 25 people would sleep in each one. One was a command headquarters that Aba slept in with a couple of his friends, and they also had all their meetings there. One of them was a bathhouse where - because there was a real problem with lice - and so they had a bathhouse that would get, get rid of the lice. We got into the underground bunkers on both of our trips. They were camouflaged where you couldn't see nothing. They would dig them down, dig down below and they would line them with young trees. And so, they made, that was their shelter and you put 20-25 people together in a small area; it warms up. And that's how they live.

- 54:17 Michael Bart: Food? There's no food. Nobody's going to give them food. The Russian partisans aren't going to give them food. So they did three things: one is they didn't eat, two they would go to the outside of where they were - to the villages and farms - and they would rob them and steal. They would do it in a way where they wouldn't take everything that belonged to people, because other people had to eat, but they needed to get food. Or three, they made a concoction that no human being should live on. It was called *balanda* and what *balanda* was, it was flour - which was plentiful - in swamp water. And what it did is it filled your stomach. It would give you indigestion, but at least you didn't feel sick from not eating. So that's what they were doing. Now there were a total of 300 partisans of Vilna, 150 escaped from, from other ghettos - from Kovno, and other places - 150 were the resistance people from Vilna. All the leaders were from Vilna. The Nekomah unit - avengers unit - led by Abba Kovner had 108 when my mom and dad were. Well, what sabotage are our 300 partisans going to do - at least with the partisans of Vilna with 28 rifles - not much, until they were able to get better weaponry. And how they started getting better weaponry was two ways, is they would ambush German patrols and they would kill them, steal their weapons.
- 55:45 Michael Bart: The Russians loved the German weapons, especially the Lugers. And they'll get, they were armed to the teeth. They'll give you anything you want for German weapons. Two, they would go to the local villages and farmhouses and what they would find, there's a village that's collaborating with the Germans. The Germans would arm them. They would rob this village, take the weapons. They were getting stuff to mine trains. They were learning how, how, what they were going to try to do. The first thing they went out there is they, they tore, they sawed every telephone pole outside the forest. Now why this forest was so important for location, it was near the Grodno railroad line, which is east-west. So when the partisans eventually were blowing up trains, everyone, Joe Harmatz in Israel said that the second best experience in his life - other than having a family - was blowing up a German train. And I said, why do you say that? He goes, we would set the percussion mines and what happened is, as soon as we would see the train come, we would pull the switch cord and the, the mine would blow up.
- 56:52 Michael Bart: If you, then you'd run inside to the forest because they were deep into the forest. If you heard secondary explosion, that was a weapons train. If you saw a lot of smoke, it was a fuel train. If you heard a lot of weapon fire then run because that was a troop train and they're probably going to be after you. But what they started doing is they were tearing up their communication lines by tearing down the telephone poles. Then they started derailling trains. Every time they derailed an east-west train they stopped the Germans cold going to the eastern front, going to Leningrad, and they were doing this where, in the, and the forest was so deep the Germans couldn't find them. The, the area was so broad and expanded that they could get, they could do this. Well, what happened is, this is a picture of a derailed Nazi train. This is what the partisans were doing. They would

set the, the mines then, as the train would come, they would blow up the mine and then they would run for the, for the forest.

57:56 Michael Bart: Now something happened that really inspired the partisans. Now I got to tell you, the thing with the Bielskis that I told you about, the movie *Defiance*, is they all try to save Jews and they all tried to make a difference in saving older people, younger people, but the movie was a little bit, um, generous in how much fighting they did with the Germans. They were very defensive and they were constantly on the move. They asked me on the premiere, here in San Diego, uh Paramount Films asked me to do a Q and A [question and answer] in La Jolla when the film came out and, uh, and I told them, you know, that this is done in the Rudniki forest. The thing in that movie that's dead-on accurate is what life was like personally. There were relationships between men and women, the difficulty. But the part that was a little extreme - the partisans of Vilna all thought they were going to die - not one of them thought they were going to live. And so, what they were doing is they were fighting for the honor and dignity of their families and the Jewish people. They didn't think they were going to live, so they had nothing, nothing to lose. What happened is the Germans were being pushed by the Red Army, uh, west and they saw what was coming. They needed to get rid of the evidence of Ponary, all of, all the buried bodies.

59:08 Michael Bart: So what they did is they had, they forced Jews to start digging out the bodies and they were throwing them in pits and burning them. And a number of Jews - 12 - escaped and some of them got to the, the partisans and told them what was going on. That inspired - including one who lived in the same bunker with my mom and dad for a while - and that inspired partisans to make a difference and do whatever it took to make a difference. Well what happened is as the Jews were getting better weapons and they were making a difference, the Russian's command realized that these guys were there for real and, ironically, they brought in a new head of the Russian partisan who didn't tell people but he was Jewish - but he wasn't practicing. So he basically realized that these people were there to try to make a difference and so they started getting better weaponry and then they were blowing up more trains. There was a village called Koniuchy and the, the Germans couldn't get to the partisans. The partisans were causing havoc and the Germans needed to stop the partisans. So, what they started doing is looking for the most antisemitic villages who, villagers who even knew the forest better than the partisans to try to kill the partisans, and they armed them to the teeth.

1:00:25 Michael Bart: And there was a village called Koniuchy that was in an area very, very dangerous for the partisans because, and so they were losing casualties on every mission. Now, a typical mission, train mission for my dad - it took one day to go from where they were walking to the outskirts of the of the forest. Then they would wait for the right opportunity to blow up a train. They would blow up a train and they would get back and he would do it twice a week. Sometimes he went on

the food missions which were very dangerous. A lot of people, my dad was actually shot on a food mission but this village Koniuchy was armed by the Germans. They were antisemitic and they were, the Jews, the partisans were dying one by one and what happened is somebody got to the village and saw that they had captured two Jewish partisans. They were dead and they had them hung up. So they went back. They discussed it with the Jewish partisan command. They went to the Russian partisan command with his, the leaders - his name was Yurgis - and they made a decision. We're going to take out this village for good. We're going to let everybody within 100 miles know, you don't collaborate with the Germans without a price. So about 50 percent Russian partisans, 50 percent Jewish partisans went to the village of Koniuchy. They surrounded it from three sides. The, the instructions and orders were anybody who resists, kill him. If they surrender, let him go across the lake, but burn the village. Kill every bit of livestock. Level the village like it didn't exist.

1:02:01 Michael Bart: So they came from three directions. They did exactly, they did exactly and that's controversial, but the ones who, who didn't want to resist were allowed to go across the lake. They came from the other three directions and anybody who resisted were killed. They burned the village. But guess what? Nobody messed with the partisans again the whole time, the whole year they were out in the woods. Now is that, let me ask you, that's controversial. But if you were dying - somebody was killing you one by one collaborating with the Germans - what do you do? Do you die one by one, or do you go in there and you eliminate the problem? These people had become very battle-hardened and they were, their families were killed. They thought they had nothing to lose and they were going to go with dignity. There was, uh, somebody who was with the partisans, um, in, um, in their group who wasn't a fighter, but he was a writer and he used to, he did jobs for him. He was a guard but he kept track of all what they knew, that they, they accomplished. And, you know, you don't know, when you blow up a train how many troops you kill. You don't know how many weapons. You don't know, you don't know what you accomplished. But you do, these guys, what they did know is Dov, Dov Levin a historian in Hebrew University wrote a book and he said, what they did is they blew up 11 mill - this is 108 members of Abba Kovner's Avengers group - they blew up 11 military plants, 5 bridges, 3 electric transformers, 2 factories, 1 water tower. Uh, they blew up and destroyed 7 locomotives, 33 railroad cars. They blew up and dismantled railroad tracks 350 times.

1:03:43 Every time stopped the Germans for hours. How much difference did that make? When you stop the Germans they can't go east to west. They cut and destroyed all the communication lines. They ambushed German military patrols. They killed 212 enemy soldiers, just ambushed them so they could get their weapons. They don't know what they killed, who were on the trains but they, they, Eisenhower - who is the head of Allied forces - gave a quote about the, our partisans and what he said is, quote, "the disruption - this is at the Holocaust Museum - of enemy rail

transportation throughout occupied Eastern Europe by the organized forces of the resistance played a considerable part in the Allied victory.” I mean this quote is at the US Holocaust Museum and so these folks made a difference. Okay, two members who were in the labor camp with my mom's mother and brother escaped. And what happened is, they got to the woods and they said, you know, told my mom her mother and brother are alive. So the Red Army was pushing the, uh, the Nazis west and the Red Army came to the Rudniki forest and they met with the partisans. And they said, we would like, we're gonna, within days we're gonna try to liberate Vilna and we want you involved. We're gonna send the mechanized forces first in the heavy artillery. We're going to give the Germans a day of surrender, and if they don't then we're going to send in all the forces. And we want you because number one, you know the city, and number two, you're motivated and you've earned the right to be involved. So they asked the partisans of the Vilna to be involved.

1:05:24 Michael Bart: My mother and my father were particularly motivated because my mother had heard that her brother and her mother were still alive and that was very motivating. The Germans, Hitler would not allow the surrender and they were being pounded in Vilna and the battle lasted eight days before they literally killed almost every of the remaining surrendered. The partisans of Vilna immediately got to HKP, where the Jewish labor camp was, to see how many Jews were left. The Germans, who were escaping out of Vilna, shot everybody in the camp. My mother found her mother and her brother shot, lying in a pile right here. That photo that you see - the partisan photo that you'll see again in the end - when you went when you know your parents and you know their, you know their personalities and their inflections - when I look at that, my dad looks infuriated, and I know the look, and my mom looked depressed, and I knew that look. And the reason why is, that photo was taken July 14, 1943 - the day after they found their bodies buried in a pile.

1:06:37 Michael Bart: Now, something interesting happened after the liberation of Vilna. There was a writer who wrote for *Red Star* and he wrote for *Pravda* named Ilya Ehrenberg and he was born and raised Jewish, although not practicing. He was so intrigued that the fact that the Jews would do this to the, to the Nazis that he wanted in every paper in the Soviet Union. There's my dad right there. This, uh, this is an, imagine you're, you know, your, your parents are in *Pravda*. But there's my dad right there in the same photo, and basically, he was really proud, and he, they use it for propaganda. Now, something that I'm going to have to read you because - they needed to try to make contact with their family in the US. My mother had uncles that had gotten out about 20 years ago and my father wanted to go to Palestine. My mother wanted to go to the US. They made a deal was, if they could find their uncles in the US, they'll go to the US, if not they'll go to Palestine. Um well, I'm gonna see if I can read this over here. They needed, they needed somebody to help them write in English and they needed to say something

good about the Russians because it had to go through Russian screeners. By then, Stalin is becoming paranoid thinking about how he's going to take over Europe. What they wrote, and this was in Vilnius, Lithuania.

1:08:02 Michael Bart: My dear Uncle I am to inform you that I, your sister Rose's daughter, left one from the whole family - meaning last one. I was a Russian partisan and was saved by the glorious Red Army. Please inform all relatives about the sorrowful state. I'd look forward to hearing. My husband gives regards - something like that. But here's the problem she knew her uncle lived on Belle Street - Belle Street in Springfield, America, but there's 13 of them. So they send a postcard. It got to the right address seven months later. Now you wonder, how, how did I get all these documents? Partly my parents had stuff, partly researching all over the world, and it's amazing, if you put in the time, what you can find, and Bonnie and I did that for years. So it basically, it was sent September 7, [19]44 arrived May 26th after the war [19]45. Okay, my dad wanted to go back to his hometown. He wanted to see what happened to his family. So they go to Hrubieshov and he gets to the woods, or excuse me, he gets to the house where his parents live and he doesn't recognize - it looked different to him. There was like, he said it was like a curtain. So he knocked on the door and somebody came out and said, what do you want? And he said this is my family's house. And he goes, not anymore. And my father said, you have 24 hours to leave and I'll be back.

1:09:39 Michael Bart: And my mother said, he was going to kill everybody in the family. By then the partisans weren't exactly graduates of charm school and so he was going to kill everybody there. A priest who recognized my dad growing up went and said, why are you here? And he goes, I came to take my family's possessions. And he goes, they're not going to give you anything. They're just, they're, they're going to get the neighbors together and they're just going to kill you, and haven't enough Jews died? My father realized there was no hope and so what they did is he joined, rejoined the partisans. They got to Bucharest, Romania, war's end, fireworks going off, everybody's celebrating. The partisans didn't have much to celebrate. Well believe it or not when my dad, they ended up in Italy and he ended up in a DP camp - a displaced persons camp - and this looks worse than it is. He never had a concentration camp uniform - that's my dad middle - but they didn't have clothes and all, everybody was full of lice and typhoid and everybody was so - they had no clothes. So temporarily, this is the Cinecittà famous movie studio in Italy that was a DP camp. This is after they got out of the DP camp and they're living in an apartment. They stayed in Italy for three years waiting for the family to get a hold of them.

1:11:01 Michael Bart: What was happening was the International Red Cross was posting lists of people in major cities who were looking for each other. Their family finally found him in Rome and was going to sponsor him into the US and so this is them at a, an Italian restaurant in Italy, you know, after you know the war was over. And

there's my dad. Now something that bothered my mom, my dad didn't care, is she was wondering, is our marriage legal? And my dad says, it wasn't a big deal to him but it was to my mom. So they went to the chief rabbi in Rome in 1945, I believe, in 1946 and they they won. They said, we have witnesses here that were at our wedding and we want to make sure one, documentation that our wedding was legal. And the chief rabbi and, believe it or not, it was called the Community, the Israeli Community of Rome, and the chief rabbi gave them - I got the original document showing that their marriage was legal - and it says that who they were and they were married in the Vilna ghetto. Now the US Holocaust Museum flew an archivist out to our house because, I mean, we have documentation and they wanted to make a display, and they wanted to do something, and we ultimately will do that. For some reason, I'm having a hard time giving up on the originals, but ultimately we're going to be doing that. And somebody came and met with us.

1:12:31 Michael Bart: Okay families got him, finally going to the US two years later and I got their original shipping bill - their ticket for the, they went on the SS Marine Perch, an American troop ship that was decommissioned. And I don't know how, but my mother was in officer's class and my father was in, you know, a low enlisted man or something. And so, they went, I don't know how that worked out. Nobody ever explained that to me. First day in the US. There's my my mom and my dad. They're at a famous restaurant in New York. It's the Old Roumanian Restaurant, now a lot of people know. That's her uncle that sponsored him into the US. He was born in Vilna. He got out in the early 1900s. She had two uncles that had got, actually three, who have gone out. Now everybody always asks me, since really the story for me started at the funeral - because that's really what inspired me to do what I was going to do. Did I ever inscribe *Freedom Fighters of Nekamah* on their gravesite? Well, I did, the back of their gravesite. It's at Greenwood cemetery and it says, Nekamah Freedom Fighters, and I proudly did that. And um, there's their photo taken when they were first in Rome, and then that's their photo very late in life.

1:13:50 Michael Bart: Again, this is this photo. This is a, this is, a lot of people that I answer - I'll answer two questions that everybody asks me, and everybody - I know what people are going to say, you're going to do a film. And the answer is, my publisher St. Martin's Press is one of the largest publishers in the world. They're one of the big six with Macmillan; that's their company, and when they I signed into a contract with them, they asked for the film rights. And through their, one of their, uh, imprints they did a, a book that was very successful in film. It's called *The Pianist*. So they asked me for the film rights and I have not as yet given up the film rights, and I don't care how many zeros you give me on a check, or how much money you tell me I'm going to make, I won't sign film rights unless I have script approval. Because otherwise, somebody else has the last say in my parent's life, and if they make it interesting for a movie but not historically accurate, then everything I did was for waste. And I don't need the money. And so, the reality is - I told my literary

agent - she knows if somebody comes and wants me involved and she says, well I've got somebody who will, you know, who's interested and he'll answer, ask you questions, if he has any questions, and I say no thank you.

1:15:18 Michael Bart: So that's one question that everybody - and people ask how the book did. Well - and then I'll wrap up for questions in a minute - I got into this thing ever, not even thinking I was ever going to be published, and then my aspirations were maybe a university press, and then I had University of Nebraska wanting to publish it - University of Missouri. Um, I don't know, a whole bunch of them were in and they send it out to review. And I was going to probably go with University of Nebraska because they were an extraordinary publisher, and all of a sudden my agent called me and said, St. Martin's Press wanted to publish your book. And they said that the literary, the editor said, it's, for her it's very personal and she really would like to do this. Nobody told me why. Well, it turned out she was extraordinary. She was German and her grandparents were Nazis, and she, it was personal for her because she was really touched by this story. And it wasn't that they offered me tons of money. You know, they were good but, you know, it didn't, it wasn't about money. But they offered me an opportunity, uh, that was extraordinary.

1:16:23 Michael Bart: And so, in the end, result, you know, that the first printing of the book I think was 20 or 30,000 copies, and then what happens is we were going to go to paperback but then something happened in the industry where nobody's reading paper. They're even, now everybody's, you're doing the e-readers and so 90 percent of our books now are sold as e-readers. So no, the publishers aren't interested in publishing many more and we did 30 in the hard[back books] because everybody's doing that in e-readers. Now Bonnie and I haven't done an e-reader yet so maybe we'll get, we'll get into that. But as far as the honors the books have gotten - three really - um one fairly small, one a little bit larger, and one enormous. The small one is there's an organization in San Diego called the San Diego Book Writers Association and they've been, you know, for a long time. And the book won an award, I think, three years ago for best biography. And that was nice and we went to, they had a little 100 people gala and it was really kind of nice. The second one was the National American Library Association nominated it for a Sophie Brody Medal. Sophie Brody Medal was ironically started from somebody who was in San Diego. Arthur Brody and Sophie Brody funded a thing where they have a thing where you get a medal for the most significant contribution to Jewish literature published in the US and I was nominated for a Sophie Brody Medal in 2009, which was amazing.

1:17:50 Michael Bart: So then the capper for me was my editor called me. She usually emailed and she called. She goes, I got some extraordinary news and I go, what's that? And she says you've won a Christopher Award. And I go, oh okay. Are you going to send it to me? Yeah, I didn't know what it was. And she said, Michael, this



is big, big, big, in our industry. St. Martin's Press has only had two Christophers in, in its entire existence. And then I go, what what is it? She goes, go online, and learn. And I went online and Christopher's is a Catholic organization, and what they do for 60 years - and we got the award on the 60th anniversary - for 60 years the Christopher's - and nobody knows how they, who they pick and how they pick it - but they pick film and books that affirm the highest value of the human spirit. So, and the year that I won a Christopher, I was sitting next to Steve Lopez from the, who won for *The Soloist*, Clint Eastwood, and Ron Howard won it for their film, for *The Changeling*, and Danny Boyle won for *Slumdog Millionaire*. And so, my, my editor said, you know this is a big gala. There'll be 300 people there. You know Fox covered it. The local news networks were there. And so, I received a Christopher and that's something, you know, when I was sitting there, and there, and the, uh, the person who gave me the Christopher had won Oscars and Emmys. And she was an amazing person and she said, you know when I read his book I realized they have to make a movie out of this, and so that, that's basically the results of that. And now, I am open to answering your questions.

1:19:39 Speaker 2: Thank you for your marvelous presentation.

1:19:42 Michael Bart: Thank you.

1:19:43 Speaker 2: I've got a little [unclear] about where you were at this time and your relationship with your father. At one point I thought you said you had a stepfather.

1:19:52 Michael Bart: No my mother

1:19:54 Speaker 2: Your mother.

1:19:55 Michael Bart: My mother. I only had two parents and they were married 56 years.

1:19:58 Speaker 2: Where were you [unclear]

1:20:02 Michael Bart: oh, that was taken during the war and I wasn't even born. I was born in the US. So, I just look old.

1:20:12 Speaker 3: You mentioned *Defiance* and the Bielskis. Have you been in contact with, I believe it's Bielski's granddaughter?

1:20:19 Michael Bart: Daughter. She did get a hold of me. Ironically, how she got a hold of me was the editor of the of the *Jewish Journal* in San Diego. Mark Moss is a budding friend of mine and I for, you know, here's somebody who didn't even want anything to do with the Holocaust, and I got involved with the, the Holocaust commemoration held at the JCC [Jewish Community Center] uh, about seven years ago. They asked me to take over his chair and, because the survivors are dying, and I started getting all the organizations, and I wanted to build the program. And so, she got a hold of me through Mark Moss and then Zeb [Zus] um,

one of the Bielski - the wild Bielski in the Bielski movies - I mixed up his name. His son got a hold of me too and so I have been in touch with them. You know the the Bielski thing was was extraordinarily accurate of life in the ghetto or, excuse me, life in the woods there. They they didn't give a complete narrative. They didn't give a complete narrative on what it was like, um, fighting against the Nazis because they were running from the Nazis - but they were trying to save people, and they did save a thousand people. So, you know, where the Jews - the partisans of Vilna - a hundred died out of 300. Two hundred lived but what they, imagine what their accomplishments, of what they did as well.

- 1:21:35 Speaker 4: I have two questions as well. First of all, thank you very much. This is wonderful [unclear]. So, two things. One is that book by Rich Cohen [*The Avengers*] which is, he was related to Abba Kovner's lover - not wife - if I had it right? I thought the book was gossip. That maybe I shouldn't have been reading it, and he shouldn't have been writing it. And my second question has to do with [unclear] chapter about Abba Kovner after the war planning the gassing of 6 million Germans.
- 1:22:08 Michael Bart: Well a lot about that. But okay, let me tell you, uh, the first thing about *Avengers* and Rich Cohen. What, okay, Rich Cohen was a distant relative of Ruska Korczak, and what Rich did is when, supposedly they would go visit his distant relatives in Israel occasionally when he was young. And he would hear these stories because the partisans were, in Israel it was a badge of honor to be a partisan because Israel was trying to build a country and they needed to show toughness and a part of the partisans were rock stars in Israel. Um, I was always a little uncomfortable. Well see, you know I had, I had my parents were extraordinary. My dad was a perfectionist and my mom - they're very accurate people and I, I did everything I could to tell the information based on either what they told me, or based on what other partisans told me, or other members in the ghetto during my research. And so, and if I wasn't absolutely comfortable in telling it, I would keep it out. And there was plenty of stuff that I didn't put in the book. Rich was looking, you know, for a career and so he didn't have the same responsibilities I did. I have responsibilities as a child of the survivors to be accurate with their story. Rich could tell anything and if he gets something loosely right, loosely wrong. And so, I don't think his book was ever footnoted. And so he basically, where ours, you know, for a historian like Professor Hertz - Dr. Hertz - you know, my book is not quite a historical book that she would probably go with, but a far cry from the *Avengers*.
- 1:23:56 Michael Bart: And then the second question, oh, about the gassing. What Abba Kovner and a number of the partisans, when they realized all their families were killed - when they got back to Vilna and realized everything was gone - they wanted, they wanted to kill Germans. And, matter of fact, Joe Harmatz was involved with them - the guy that I met accidentally in Vilna. And what they were

trying to do is, they were trying to basically poison German prisoners. And uh, they were serious, and they, it's, it's been - all kinds of stories about how successful they were. But in the end, they were really pushed by the leaders in Israel, [David] Ben-Gurion and even all the members of the harder line factions not to do it because then they're going to equate you with the Nazis and then we don't hit. And so, ultimately uh, Kovner was somehow arrested by the Brits because he was probably turned in by somebody. And uh, but he, he, you know, he - a lot of people don't realize this about, and I'll tell you this about Kovner. Kovner founded an organization with members of the partisans of Vilna called the Bricha. Now, anybody who was at our community program the other day, I spoke real quickly about the Bricha.

- 1:25:09 Michael Bart: The Bricha was the illegal escape of concentration camp, you know, as Holocaust survivors from Europe after the war was over to get to Palestine. Now the British had a blockade and so most of them were caught and put in Cyprus but what happened is, when they gave up the their blockade the, all the concentration camp and all the survivors were shipped to Palestine, today Israel. They were taken off the ships. They were put on buses, and they were given weapons, and they were told to fight. And because five Arab armies attacked Israel, and they were fighting in the War of Independence, many historians around the world say, if it wasn't for and 150,000 survivors that got to Israel via the Bricha that Israel would have lost the war. Especially Letrun, because they were fighting and dying at Letrun and trying to save Jerusalem. And so, Abba Kovner and the members of the partisans of Vilna founded the Bricha. Go on, you know, if anybody's interested Google b-r-i-c-h-a and - I think in Hebrew it means escape - or uh, anyway, that's - any other questions?
- 1:26:27 Speaker 5: I have a question about that picture with the partisans. Do you know who took it and what the occasion was?
- 1:26:33 Michael Bart: I do. It was taken by the photographer for Ilya Ehrenberg who, um, was the Soviet, uh, journalist who found - after the liberation - found out there were Jewish partisans killing Nazis. And what he did is, he had his photographer take it. So that's why we know the date. We have all the information. And so it was literally the day after the city of Vilna was liberated from the Nazis.
- 1:26:58 Speaker 6: What um, besides writing this - this has obviously taken up a big part of a few years here - what do you do otherwise? What did your parents do?
- 1:27:09 Michael Bart: That's a good two-part question. My, my mom was a homemaker. She really didn't work. Um, you know, they grew up in an era where, in the old days, middle-class people only one person had to work. Today it's a different, different narrative but my father got, you know, jobs. He was working as a sales rep or salesman, and then he got ill. And what happened, he got in - probably in the mid to early [19]60s - he became very ill. He went to all the hospitals and they

said that you damaged your lungs during the war. And it would be equivalent to somebody have, doing, being a smoker and then today having COPD [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease]. He had a similar situation, and one of his lungs was 25 percent working and the other was 50 percent and they said that you needed to go to a warm climate and you might have five or ten years. He came to San Diego with my mom. He had an extraordinary doctor, my mother, unbelievable care, better medicine. He lived 30 years. And then, what do I do? How do I find the time to be traveling all over the world? Bonnie has made three documentary films that have been seen by 2,000 people at the community Holocaust commemoration, and we spend 10 years on this. We're real estate investors and so far, knock on wood, you know, we've done fairly well financially. And we have, we can make our own schedule. And so, and we don't have nine to fives, and so we've been fortunate financially and that we have the time so we could do this.