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Notes from the Polish Underground Fort Lee woman recalls her partisan past

JOANNE PALMER

FORT LEE – Everyone thought I was a shiksa, said Eta Wrobel. I had long braids and a big cross. They thought I was a Pole. Wrobel, who was born in 1918, is a solid, forthright woman with a direct gaze. The walls of her sun-filled apartment here are covered with photographs of family members and of politicians and other well-known figures shaking her hand, and with plaques from many grateful organizations. It seems hard to imagine her living in the Polish woods during World War II.

As she tells her story, though, iron glints. Wrobel was a partisan during the war, one of between 20,000 and 30,000 Jews who lived in the forests of eastern Europe and fought against the Nazis. Her fluency in German and Polish, her knowledge of Polish Catholic culture, and her apparently Slavic good looks; character traits that are harder to categorize but seem to include brains, courage, and will; and simple good luck seem to have contributed to her survival.

Wrobel, the second of 10 children, grew up in the Polish town of Luckow, close to Lublin. The town was home to about 28,000 people, 8,000 of them Jewish, and her family owned its largest bakery. A smart, precocious tomboy, Wrobel became her father's secretary when she was 10 years old. She wrote letters for illiterate townswomen; "that started my career as a writer," she said. She entered the local girl's gymnasium at 12, although most children began when they were 14. The school was private and expensive, and only about four or five Jews were in its student body. I was the youngest and the best in every subject, Wrobel said; after school she played soccer with the boys. The school rewarded its top student each year by having her dance with the mayor at the town ball; for four years in a row that honor was Wrobel's. Wrobel describes her triumphs as a child without bragging about them; they



Eta Wrobel in 1945, shortly after her experience as a Jewish Partisan.

simply are the elements of her background that she fused into tools when she needed them. I was the one who my father said was dangerous, she said. I did everything I wasn't supposed to do. I was very daring; I was the one who started the dance.

Wrobel began working for the Polish underground early, in 1938, before Germany overran Poland. You see, in the beginning, right in the beginning, my father belonged to the underground, Wrobel said. That underground movement was organized by the Polish government to protect it against the encroaching Germans. I was sent to work in an employment agency, she said. I went in there to have my eyes and ears open....People were being sent away, and they never came back. Her job was to find out as much as she could about what was happening, and to do whatever she could to stop it.

She went to work early and stayed late; employed as a translator, she also washed windows. I'm an expert window-washer, she said. She would also forge documents; I went to a meeting with a document that my boss wrote but he didn't write it, she said. Then she was denounced by the Judenrat. One morning, I came to work and every thing I did the false papers, the files was out. I was arrested and sent to jail. The jail was in Lublin, and nobody ever came out from it, she said, but the underground organized and smuggled her out.

The director of the jail in Lublin, who was German, liked my braids; he liked my hair, and he liked me, Wrobel said. I was cute, and my German was beautiful. He allowed her to keep the braids, although the heads of most of the prisoners were shaved; had her head been shaved she would have been recognized as an escaped prisoner. Once she was out of prison she went back to the ghetto in Luckow; she stayed there until it was demolished and the remaining Jews shipped out in October 1942. Wrobel's immediate family died around that time. Her mother, Shaindel, and six of the children were sent to Treblinka in May and vanished from the record; one sister, who was pregnant, was shot. Her father, Pinkus, and two brothers escaped; the brothers never reappeared, but her father, overcome by despair, eventually turned himself in and was killed.

Wrobel said that the most important thing was to defy the Germans, to save other people. She constantly took risks and had many close calls. Once, she said, I saved my life by saying "Holy Mother." She had been sitting in a field with her father, just before he gave up, when a soldier came up from behind and threatened them. Because she was pretending to be Polish Catholic and in character all the time, she reacted by calling out to the Virgin Mary; her would-be assailant,

unable to believe that a Jew would have said that, let her go. I knew all the Christian prayers, she said, just in case I got caught.

Another time, she said, she was sitting on a train she often brought supplies from Polish peasants and carried ammunition, guns, or grenades from place to place when the police stopped the train. They started to search the passengers. We were always ready, she said, and I knew that this was the end. But a nun was sitting across from me, young, with a beautiful face. The nun gave Wrobel her suitcase, and the two walked away from the train together. Once they were clear, the nun told Wrobel to keep herself safe; Wrobel thanked the other woman, and asked her why she did it. "Oh, my dear child, I saw death in your eye," the nun answered.

Much of the time, Wrobel lived with other partisans in the woods, although she also spent time in towns, passing as Catholic and trying to win help and buy supplies. My aim was to find out where Jews were hiding, and to make the Poles feel as if they had to help, she said. As time went by and the Germans began to lose the war, the dynamics changed. The Germans never came into the woods, Wrobel said. They were scared. But the Poles did, to guard against Russians. They believed that all Jews were Communists.

Eventually, the Russian army took over Poland. I was going out in the world all the time, Wrobel said, so when the Russians came I heard about it and, went out to see. I saw two Russians and one was Jewish. When I said I was Jewish, he grabbed me and danced around with me. And then we went to town. After the war, Wrobel returned to Luckow, and she became mayor. She was also secretly sending Jews to Israel on Aliyah Bet, a wave of illegal immigrants from wartorn Europe. Had anyone official found out, with me in my position? A bullet in my head! she said.

When she was 29 years old, married to Henry, a Polish Jew who had left Luckow as a child only to return atop a Russian tank, Wrobel, by then the mother of a 7-week-old son, was called into the office of a high-ranking Polish government official. She was told that she was going to be made mayor of a larger town, but first had to go to special school in Moscow for a month.

We left that night, Wrobel said. Her husband closed the restaurant that had supported them, and they fled to Berlin. We had nothing, Wrobel said. On the other hand, "they were going to come

for me the next day."

From the Russian sector of Berlin the Wrobels got to the American sector, and their second child was born there. Four months afterward, the family moved to the United States.

Eta Wrobel now belongs to many organizations; whatever there is, I belong to it, she said. She is the guiding force behind a branch of Hadassah open only to survivors, and she will be honored this month by YIVO as she has been by the World Jewish Congress, Israel Bonds, and museums and universities. She's been honored by New York's UJA. She said that if she could tell



Eta Wrobel in a recent photo in her Fort Lee home.

young people just one thing, it would be that there is no greater heroism than having survived the Holocaust. No one of us really understands how we managed to survive. She has four children, 11 grandchildren, and one great-grandchild, and the face she presents to the world is even-tempered. "My mood doesn't change, she said. Some people can't take any more. But for me, this is reality. This is the way it is. I can be at a party and be the last one on the dance floor. But what happened cannot be forgotten. It cannot be changed.

Wrobel began to write when she was a child, and she still writes. One piece she wrote includes this passage: "No one else survived. Some names were given to our second and third generation. Not all of them, though, for I have so many. Our children will therefore know some of the names. The names.

But what about the faces? There is no trace left. All is gone.

A Missing Piece of Holocaust History

JOANNE PALMER

During the nightmare years of World War II and the Holocaust, somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 Jews hid in the dense forests of Eastern Europe. Some had escaped from camps and ghettos and others headed for the woods before they could be taken prisoner.

Forming into groups, working only with other Jews or with other resistance fighters, the partisans fought the Nazis. According to Mitch Braff of the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, they blew up supply trains, they sabotaged power plants, they hijacked trucks. They also helped each other to survive.

Braff, a 35-year-old filmmaker who lives in Northern California, stumbled across the story of the partisans accidentally, and it has changed his life.

"Almost two years ago I met someone who was in a ghetto in Lithuania, when he was 15; a year later he was with a group of Russian partisans, blowing up trains," Braff said. "I never knew that there were partisans like him. I thought about when I was 16 years old, and how different my life was. Had I lived then, my life might or might not have been like his. It's a missing piece of Holocaust history; we know about the ghettos and the camps but we don't know that much about the partisans. When we thought about the Jewish experience during the Holocaust we were missing an important piece of information. Even people of my parents' generation didn't know about it. While we have the opportunity to talk to these people, we should get their stories."

Braff formed the foundation last year to record and help save partisans' stories. He is interviewing partisans; eventually some of the stories will be on the group's Website and all will be available through the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Simon Wiesenthal

Center in Los Angeles. Among his interviews is one with Eta Wrobel of Fort Lee (see main story).

"I make films," said Braff. "I never thought that I would start and ultimately become executive director of a non-profit. I was kind of minding my own business when I heard the story and thought it was worthwhile to explore it."

"We want to make the partisans' stories accessible and engaging by putting them online on a Website, not just in an archive. Our average interview is about four hours long and we talk mainly about being a partisan, not about their entire lives. About 80 percent of the interview focuses on their experiences as partisans."

Braff is also working on a 30-minute film about Jewish partisans, aimed at children; the Anti-Defamation League may distribute the film once it is done.

Braff is actively looking for partisans who are willing to tell their stories and for supporters who will help finance the project. The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation's Website is www.jewishpartisans.org. The organization's phone number is (415) 896-1415.