

JEWISH PARTISANS IN THE WOODS

Excerpt from a Novel

By Chaver Paver

The Editors consider it a duty and a privilege to publish the following excerpt from a novel, Night Can't Last Forever, by Chaver Paver (the pen name of Gershon Einbinder). The subject is heroic and important, the writing mature and moving, the total impact powerful. Yet a number of commercial publishers have turned down the manuscript, too timid to risk their money on a novel that reveals the essential truth about a subject already much misrepresented.

For Chaver Paver has dared to write about the life of those Polish Jews who fought the nazis not in the ghetto uprisings but as partisans in the Polish woods, where they lived, fought, died and survived together with Polish partisans, escaped Russian prisoners and Soviet partisans. "All of the events described in this novel have actually taken place, though a few of the characters are fictitious," Chaver Paver says laconically in a prefatory note. Yet the misleading tendentiousness of John Hersey's The Wall is lavishly endowed and readily published while Chaver Paver's work, basically more truthful, meets only strangling rejections. Perhaps the excerpt printed below will stimulate the conscience and the will to invest of at least one publisher.

Our publication in the September issue of Chaver Paver's short story, The Boxing Match, caused many of our readers

to ask us, in effect, where has this writer been all our lives? As we indicated then, this was the first story he had ever written in English. As a Yiddish writer, Chaver Paver has an international reputation. Born in Bershar, Russia, in 1901, and educated in a Yeshiva, he finally made his way to our country in 1924. It is noteworthy that his four Yiddish novels until now have dealt with American Jewish life in Brownsville (Brooklyn), the Bronx and Clinton Street on New York's lower East Side. A Yiddish play written in 1931-32, Hold the Fort, dealt with the life of the Southern Negroes. Night Can't Last Forever, therefore, is his first novel dealing with Jewish life outside the United States. Originally written in Yiddish, it was serialized a year ago in the Morning Freiheit and then translated into English by the author himself. The simplicity and precision of his English style are themselves of a high literary order.

In the story, David and Miriam are young Warsaw Jews, betrothed to one another, who fled Warsaw when the nazi invasion came. They were captured and sold into slave labor by the nazis and then escaped to the partisans in the woods. The subtlety, diversity and complexity of the relations between Jews and non-Jews are fully presented in this novel.

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FAITHFUL Pakula was the unofficial chief of the underground movement among the peasants in the villages around the partisan base in the Skrodnitz woods. In his own village of Marianka, except among the patriots of the underground, no one knew about his activities. They thought of him as a poor, submissive, not-too-bright man; and that 'poor, submissive, not-too-bright' Pakula sniffed and scouted around and even rode off to surrounding towns to find out what was doing. He learned on one of his scouting trips that there was an order from the highest nazi authorities to mobilize a great force against the partisans in the Skrodnitz woods.

The guerrillas decided to disperse.

Bishka wanted to remain with David and the Mariankars but David talked it over with Vaska and it was agreed he should be taken across the Bug River and left with the Soviet partisans, who would smuggle him over to the Big Earth (Soviet Russia) as they had already done with many Jewish orphans.

When the sextet took leave of the Jewish partisans, Bishka cried, not at all as befitted a guerrilla who had already killed a nazi and had also thrown a grenade—cried and kept pressing against David, who walked with him part of the way.

After the sextet left for the Bug, the Mariankars started off to the swamps in the Kaplinos woods, 50 kilometers away, for there, they heard, were a large number of Jewish partisans organized into an independent group with Jehiel and Vanka Kirpichnik as the leaders. David fervently hoped, too, that there in the Kaplinos woods among the Jewish guerrillas, he might find Miriam.

Moishe Lichtenstein and his Wlodawars withdrew to the forest close to Wlodawa, calculating that it wouldn't occur to the Germans to hunt for them right under their noses, and there they were to wait for a sign from the Mariankars that they could come on to the Kaplinos woods too.

The Marianka group now consisted of eight people:

David, Noah, Rivka, the three brothers—Jochanan, Gedaliah, and Shimshen, and Berl Kornman with his 11-year-old daughter Bebala. They were guided to the Kaplinos woods by young Janek the poet, who knew the Kaplinos section well.

Janek was the son of a very poor peasant. A self-taught man, he had a great passion for books and often used to walk miles into the nearest town to borrow them from the library.

Berl Kornman had been a strong, fearless fighter. But after he lost all his five children and wife in the Skrodnitz woods early in the winter, he had become a broken, nervous man. He saw nazis everywhere. In the darkness, every tree was a nazi to him. His delicate, cornflower-blue-eyed daughter Bebala never let him out of her sight and had to comfort him as a mother her child: 'Don't be afraid, papa; it's not a nazi, it's a tree. And don't tremble; it's a shame before people.'

When they reached the woods not far from Kaplinos, Berl Kornman shouted: "Germans!"

"Papa, what are you doing?" Bebala put her hand over his mouth.

But this time her father was right. They saw through the trees three carts on the highway filled with German soldiers. David glanced at his people and they at him and understood each other immediately. There were eight guns including Janek's—and they let go from all eight. Three nazis fell on the highway. The rest, about a dozen of them, hid in the ditch at the side of the road and fired back. The peasant drivers remained in their carts, lashed their horses with wild yells and galloped away from the battle.

Bebala, when the shooting started, hid behind a tree, watched the battle in grim concentration and didn't let her father out of sight. Later, when the partisans withdrew from the road deep into the forest, far away from the Germans, Bebala upbraided her father for shooting so wildly. "You must not be so hasty when you're in a battle. You should take good aim first, papa. Look at the way the others do. Slow and sure. It's a waste of bullets."

She also made him take off his pants when they sat down for rest. Her father's only pair of pants had ripped during the battle, so Bebala took out from a little straw basket she carried in her sack, a scissors, thread, thimble and needle, and sat leaning against a tree as she mended the rip in her father's trousers.

"Just like her blessed mother, peace be with her," Berl sobbed. "She's got her golden fingers." And her fingers were really golden. Deftly and nimbly they ran over the cloth as she sang a tune—the same tune her mother used to sing when she was mending: "And God had created heaven and earth, and had created the grasses in the fields."

THEY SMELLED THE MARSHES A FEW KILOMETERS BEFORE THEY reached them. Winds filled with cool dampness and swampy odors met them. That it was a vast stretch of marsh they could tell from the croaking of thousands and thousands of frogs in various pitches, from the eerie hooting of owls,

the monotonous trilling of great numbers of crickets and the whining of millions of mosquitoes, whose bites they felt even through their clothing. In that vast stretch of swamp lay the *okhozha*—a cluster of little hilly islands surrounded by neck-deep mires impossible to cross by cart or even on horseback. The *okhozha* was part of a huge area known as Count Zamoiski's woods, spreading toward Cholm, Wlodawa and over on the other side of the River Bug.

The partisans decided to wait until dawn, when some of the patrols would probably appear and lead them to the base in the *okhozha*.

In the faint light of dawn, muffled footsteps were heard among the trees and Shimshen, who was keeping guard then, didn't have to wake up the people when he heard the footsteps: they woke up by themselves. So extremely sensitive was the ear of the partisan that, no matter how heavily he slept, he became instantly alert at the slightest sound and reached for his gun.

They now heard not only footsteps but whispers too and their sharp ears caught that the whispers came from Jews. . . . Yes, Jews they were—five guerrillas with Jehiel himself.

Jehiel, the little giant with the strong muscular face and delicate lips, smiled at them warmly. He still held an unlighted cigarette in a holder between his fingers. Noah suspected it was the same cigarette he had in the Parczew woods for whenever he had seen him, it wasn't lighted. Jehiel, a passionate smoker, wasn't able to obtain cigarettes so easily in the woods and kept an unlighted one between his fingers for almost a whole day, putting it to his lips all the time and drawing on it as if it were lighted.

"Look who's here," Jehiel exclaimed, his very alive brown eyes twinkling warmly, "David, king of the Mariankars!"

"And look who's here!" David rejoined happily, "Jehiel the smoker; here, you want a match?"

"No, thanks, I'll light my cigarette when we've set fire to the next nazi supply dump."

They inspected one another—David and Jehiel—and wondered. They had lived through such a cruel winter and yet they appeared to each other as if those severe, trying months had made them grow in strength and vigor.

"Did you come to compete with me?" Jehiel asked jokingly.

"You really should be afraid of me," David chaffed him back. "We in the Skrodnitz woods have done more than you—organized a hundred men, gotten guns for many of them, laid hands on a new machine-gun and all the raids on the Germans in the Skrodnitz section you heard of were our work."

"If that's so—good," Jehiel's alive brown eyes twinkled again. "But where are your hundred men? I don't see them here. I see only nine, counting the little girl."

"Don't worry, we have them," David winked gaily. "They don't trust you though. First they want to see how you'll treat us. Maybe it's better where they are."

"They'll be wanting to come here. Bring them all here. Now's the time for united action," Jehiel said in a comradely manner. "And now, Mariankars, let's see whether you make good monkeys."

At first they didn't catch what he meant by monkeys, but later when they began to work their way through the marsh, they caught his meaning. They had to hold onto branches of the trees growing in the marsh to keep themselves from slipping off the clumps of swamp grass into the muddy lakes.

And Bebala, just as if she'd been born in the swamp, jumped agilely from clump to clump, hanging onto the branches, cautioning and encouraging Berl Kornman, "Papa, take a good hold, Papa, take a jump. Papa, don't be afraid."

THE MEN AND WOMEN IN THE *okhozha* CAME RUNNING TO welcome them from all sides—from the tents, from the fires and from the neighboring hillocks. The Mariankars already had a name among the forest fighters. Tales went around at the partisan fires about their heroic actions, about the machine-gun they had captured and how they had rescued 100 Jews from the Wlodawa ghetto and armed them.

Corpulent Butchan waddled up barefoot, his trousers rolled up, a green beret on his big shaggy head. "David," he fell to kissing him and welcoming him in several languages. "*Sholem Aleichem, jach shemash, zdrastvooyta, bonjour*, the devil take you! How do you like our Jewish fortress? I'm the chief cook here, and they all make up to me and flatter me. Look, look, how they smile sweetly at me! Gluttons, pigs, stomachs without bottoms—a curse on your mother's milk!"

"How's about showing the Mariankars what you've got in your pots?" Jehiel said, half-joking and half-reproving.

"A plague on Hitler!" Butchan pinched his plump cheeks like a Jewish housewife who, gossiping with her neighbor, suddenly remembers she's left something boiling on her stove. "It's burning!"

"Quicker, Butchan! Faster!" the people hurried him. And Butchan imitated the same housewife running in great panic for her kitchen to rescue the burning pot.

But Berl Kornman's Bebala didn't laugh. All of them doubled up with laughter, and she, the little one with a kerchief tied on her head like a *babatchka*, with a stern face, watched critically and reprovingly. The young sensitive Bebala, who lost her mother and all her brothers and a sister, had lived through so many horrors that she couldn't understand how people were still able to laugh and joke.

David wasn't touched by Butchan's performance either. He didn't find Miriam among those who came up from all the hillocks to welcome them. She wasn't there at all; she had remained in the Parczew woods with Feodor, Jehiel told him later.

While they sat at the fire eating, Butchan gave another performance. He presented a whole railway station, with its incoming and outgoing trains, with all its hustle and

bustle. For many years he had been a porter at the Parczew railway station, so this was his best act. "Tra-tra-ta-ta," he beat on his chest and knees with both hands imitating the sound of the wheels, and "Fi-oo-oo," he blew like a locomotive whistle—"Last stop P-a-rtz-e-val!"

VANKA KIRPICHNIK, WHO CAME FROM THE HILLOCK WHERE his Polish partisans were camping, embraced David and kissed him on both his cheeks. "I'm very glad you came here, David," he said happily, "I need you here."

Vanka told him he had recruited 50 partisans from among the Polish peasants in the neighborhood and united them with the Jewish partisans in the *okhozha*. This united group was one of the first cells of the Polish *Guardia Ludowa* (People's Guard), which, when it grew to tens of thousands all over Poland, was known as the *Armia Ludowa* (Polish People's Army) . . .

The Jewish partisans in the *okhozha*, besides the 200 unarmed ones and their families in the encampment, grew to a force of 350 armed men and women.

NOT FAR FROM WLODAWA, IN THE AREA OF THE SKRODNITZ woods, known also as Count Zamoiski's woods, on the Adampol estate, 800 Jewish men and 40 beautiful young Jewish girls were kept in slavery by Baron Zelinger, one of the leaders of the Gestapo in the Lublin district. Baron Zelinger saw to it that his slaves should be spared for the time being and not be sent to the death factory of Sobibor, for these 800 Jews were the most highly qualified workers in all Poland—tailors, carpenters, tractor-drivers, goldsmiths, furriers and hatters—each of them a master of his craft. Baron Zelinger carefully selected them from the various transports destined for Sobibor's murder factory. The 40 young Jewish girls he also selected from the death trains bound for Sobibor and only the most beautiful were picked. He composed his harem of every type and shade of feminine beauty: classically built and petite, brunette, chestnut, blonde and auburn. He also kept on this estate thoroughbred stallions that he had selected from the loot which fell into the hands of the Germans after the collapse of Poland.

The contact-men who were assigned to gather information about the Adampol slave camp came back with reports that it was an impregnable fortress mined inside and out, with a large well-armed garrison, with guards posted around for a radius of two miles and no civilians allowed in the vicinity.

The Mariankars already knew every hidden path and bypath in those parts, and they, who had managed to accomplish the rescue of so many Wlodawa Jews, were assigned the mission of coming in contact with the Jews of Adampol; also while they were there in that district, they were to bring Moishe Lichtenstein and his men into the *okhozha*.

"Go, my children, and God protect you," said Yankel of Holowna, an elderly man with a patriarchal grey beard, the most respected of the elders in the encampment. "It's the holiest deed, even holier than the many deeds mentioned in the Bible." . . .