Digital Primary Resources: Soviet Jewish Veterans of WWII

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The Blavatnik Archive (BAF) is pleased to announce that 2,700 of 12,921 total items in the Veteran Testimonies & Ephemera Collection are fully digitized, cataloged, and accessible online at www.blavatnikarchive.org/collection/veteran-testimonies.

BAF’s Veteran Testimonies & Ephemera Collection, the largest collection in the world on the experience of Jews in the ranks of the Soviet armed forces during WWII, was launched in 2006. Nearly 1,200 unique video testimonies by veteran soldiers and partisans have been recorded in eleven countries, mostly during the period of 2006-2014. In addition, thousands of items from the veterans’ personal archives were digitally captured during the interview process, including photographs, letters, postcards, diaries, and state-issued documents. Collections of veterans whose testimonies were not recorded have been added to the growing collection by family members.

Items from the collection that are available online include 188 video testimonies (20% women), 1,454 photographs, 615 state-issued documents, 165 letters and postcards, 26 newspapers and periodicals, and 6 wartime diaries. Subjects include combat and military service, life at the front, ethnic relations, Jewish identity, attitudes toward women, facing the Holocaust, pre and post-war Soviet life. For all items, the website provides full source-language transcripts with English translation, as well as subject, geography, and date metadata.

Also accessible on the website are 182 unique veteran profiles; each presents a biographical description, military profile, full testimony and the veteran’s personal archive of photos and ephemera.

Highlights of the collection include:

The war-time diary of Leonid Ulitsky, from December 21, 1942 until April 22, 1944. A combat doctor, Ulitsky recorded the massive number of wounded in his unit treated in battlefield conditions and the casualties among the field medical personnel. His diary offers an insight into the everyday work of medics on the front line.

Ida Firer’s veteran profile: volunteered for the army on June 22, 1941, fought with paratrooper, infantry, medical sanitary and communications forces, and participated in the battles in Ukraine, in the Battle of Stalingrad, in the Battle of Kursk, and in

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Belarus. The video testimony and personal archive are comprised of 43 items, including 19 letters and 9 postcards she sent to her family from the front.

Pavel Elkinson's Red Army record book, issued in 1946, provides military rank and unit, general biographical data, military resume, participation in battles and list of awards, and of issued belongings.

In his video testimony, Roman Yagel describes his life before the war as one of 13 children in an orthodox Jewish family in Poland, the start of Nazi German rule in his town of Bircza in 1939, joining the Red Army border troops, the harrowing Red Army retreat in 1941, German capture and escape, combat, encounter with fellow Jewish soldiers and with survivors and learning about Nazi atrocities, including the murder of his entire family, and, finally, his migration to Israel in 1956.

Video story "Memories from the Front," with testimony clip compilations featuring daily life on the front lines, women’s experience, medical services in war, and the perspective of Jewish soldiers.

The Blavatnik Archive Foundation (www.blavatnikarchive.org) is a nonprofit foundation dedicated to preserving and disseminating primary resources that contribute to the study of 20th-century Jewish and world history, with a special emphasis on World War I, World War II, Soviet and interwar periods. The Archive was founded in 2005 by American industrialist and philanthropist Len Blavatnik to reflect his commitment to his family heritage, to explore his interests in historical events and people, and to expand his support for primary source-based scholarship and education. Currently, the Archive’s holdings of over 90,000 items include video oral histories, postcards, photographs, posters, drawings and illustrations, diaries, letters and documents, periodicals, leaflets and books.