

Papernik, Lazar Khaimovich

Private

Lazar Khaimovich Papernik was born in 1918 in the town of Slavuta in Volhynia (now Khmel'nitski oblast). His father worked on the railroad. Slavuta was known for its old Jewish print shop run by Moyshe Shapiro and sons, which had been established in the 18th century. The Talmud and other holy books published in this print shop were known throughout the entire Jewish world.

Lazar was a good student and an avid reader of Yiddish, Russian and Ukrainian novels. After completing school he entered the factory school at the First Moscow Watch Factory. Upon finishing two years of training, he worked at the same enterprise, at first in the assembly shop and later in the production shop, turning out fine hairsprings on his semiautomatic machine.

In 1935 the factory was modernized, and Papernik became a milling machine operator.

Lazar was a capable boy, and no one was surprised when he became foreman of the shop, and eventually of the entire factory.

This handsome, slender, blond lad loved sports, played football and rode horseback. He established a cycling group at the club and obtained for its members 25 bicycles and 5 motorcycles, which he himself cleaned and lubricated.

At the Civil Defense Organization, Lazar studied combat engineering and showed the young soldiers how to lay the breastwork of a newly dug trench. When the factory refused to send him to aviation school, he organized a club of glider pilots and parachutists at the factory. At the aviation club he learned about flying, and on his military registration form he entered the word "flier" on the line indicating profession. He regularly visited a shooting gallery and became quite a sharpshooter. In the winter he loved to ski.

On the day Germany attacked the Soviet Union, Papernik informed the factory that he was enlisting in the army. On July 17, 1941, he became a soldier in the Red Army. In December the Germans were forced back to the village of

Khludnevo. A detachment of skiers under the command of Captain Laznyuk was ordered to drive the Germans out of the village. On the night of January 23, 1942, twenty-five skiers, among them Lazar Papernik, moved towards the German positions in white jackets. Under cover of darkness the detachment skied unnoticed into the village, where eight of them silently took out the enemy guards. Then the detachment dug in at a half-built stable on the outskirts of the village.

From the local inhabitants they learned that in the evening enemy reinforcements had arrived with tanks, mortars and guns. The Soviet forces were outnumbered, but nonetheless resolved to enter battle. The commander split the detachment into groups of two to a house. In the houses were 20-30 Germans.

At the signal, the soldiers flung their grenades at the windows. All they could hear at first were groans and screams following the surprise attack. The panic of the enemy soldiers enabled the Soviets to move toward the center of the village, but the Germans recovered from their shock. Bringing in fresh forces, they opened fire on the handful of courageous men.

Units of a rifle division were supposed to give support to the detachment but they did not arrive. Finally, a messenger from headquarters arrived and transmitted to Captain Laznyuk the order to withdraw. But it was too late. It was getting light and the Germans were guarding all routes of retreat. The captain gave a new order:

"Everyone, into the stable and set up an all-round defense!" He hoped that they would be able to hold out until the overdue help arrived. The soldiers crawled into the stable and started to shoot. By 11:00 A.M. only 10 or 11 of the men were alive and nearly all of them were wounded, including the commander. After he lost consciousness, political instructor Yegortshev took over, but he too was hit by an enemy bullet. Then Papernik crawled to the political instructor who lay motionless, the snow under him covered with blood. Yegortsev's whisper could scarcely be heard. "I'm dying... Take over command."

Papernik knew the operational plan: Red Army units were to have attacked the enemy from the front and break through the village. But the attack

obviously had failed, and the entire burden fell upon the skiers. Papernik was now detachment commander. He told the men: "Don't give up. We'll hold out!" Smoke covered the village of Khludnevo, German guns were all around. On the snow were bodies of comrades in white ski jackets, some of them never to rise again.

The Germans were approaching. Someone behind Papernik whispered: "I've been hit." Papernik ordered him to crawl to a hollow spot behind the stable and conceal himself.

For many hours a handful of skiers held out against unequal enemy forces. The Germans cried: "Russians, give up!" but grenades and automatic weapon fire were the response. Papernik lay in the snow against the stable, his rifle pouring fire. He downed one Fascist and then another ... But he was now alone. All his comrades had been wounded or killed. His ammunition was running out. The Germans no longer crawled toward the stable, they walked boldly. They knew that this soldier was either dead or out of ammunition. They wanted to capture at least one live skier. He had no bullets but he did have a few grenades. Papernik threw one grenade after another and in this way killed 37 Germans. When the Germans came close, he raised himself to his full height and blew himself up with his last grenade. His body and the bodies of the Germans near him were scattered over the snow.

When Khludnevo was liberated from the occupiers, the inhabitants told of the heroic death of the skiers. Twenty-two heroes were posthumously awarded the Order of Lenin, and Lazar Papernik was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union posthumously by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on July 21, 1942.

One of the most beautiful streets in the eastern part of Moscow is named for Papernik. A memorial plaque is attached to house number 21 with the following words inscribed in gold letters: "This street is named in honor of Hero of the Soviet Union Lazar Khaimovich Papernik (1918-1942) who died a hero's death far from Moscow." A memorial to Papernik stands at the First Moscow Watch Factory where he once worked.

The well-known Soviet painter, Pavel Sokolov-Skal, has done a painting of the Jewish hero. In the Dzerzhinski Club in Moscow there is a bas-relief created

by the Jewish sculptor Isif Chaykov, Honored Artist. Among other scenes it portrays a young watchmaker studying the mechanism of a watch juxtaposed with Soviet soldiers fighting the Germans. In the center there is the figure of a young fighter. Under the relief, in Yiddish, are the words: "Hero of the Soviet Union Lazar Papernik. "

Source: Gershon Shapiro (Ed.), *Under Fire, the Stories of Jewish Heroes of the Soviet Union*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1988 pp. 422-425