

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **Archives**

### **Oral History Interviews of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center**

**Interview with Rae Kushner  
1982  
RG-50.002\*0015**

## **PREFACE**

In 1982, Rae Kushner was interviewed on videotape by Sidney Langer on behalf of the Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center. The interview took place in Union, New Jersey and is part of the Research Institute Archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies.

Kean College of New Jersey Holocaust Resource Center created a summary and a transcript for the interview. The reader should bear in mind that these finding aids attempt to represent the spoken word in the recorded interview, yet have not necessarily been verified by the interviewee. The finding aids should not be used in place of the interview itself.

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**Summary of the  
Interview with Rae Kushner  
1982**

Rae Kushner was born in Novogradok, Poland on February 27, 1923 to a middle class family. Her father owned two fur stores. She had two older sisters and a younger brother. Her father and her sister survived. When the Russians occupied their town in 1939, wealthy families were sent off to Siberia, but they hid successfully. Before the Germans came, Jews from the south warned her family of the atrocities being committed. She says, "We felt something was coming, but we couldn't help ourselves." When the Germans came, a ghetto was established in a suburb of Novogradok, Poland. By 1943, only 350 Jews remained in the ghetto, out of a pre-war population of 30,000. These survivors decided to escape. They spent every night for three months digging an escape tunnel. One young man did not want them to try it, certain he was a spy, some of the boys who dug the tunnel choked him to death. After the escape, Rae, her sister, and her father spent nine months in the woods. Her brother escaped through the tunnel, but they were never able to find him. They joined a partisan group led by Tuvia Bielski.

At war's end they smuggled themselves into Czechoslovakia, Austria, and then Hungary. Rae met and married her husband in Hungary. They later again crossed the Italian border. While in Italy they lived in several displaced persons camps. Rae and her husband came to the United States in 1949. She wonders why so many countries shut their doors to Jewish immigration before and during the Holocaust. She says, "Our children live a little bit of our lives. I don't know if it is so healthy for them. We live our lost youth through our children. We had no youth, our early years were spent hiding. Our middle years were spent rebuilding."

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**Transcript of the  
Interview with Rae Kushner  
1982**

Q:My name is Dr. Sidney Langer and I am the Director of the Oral History Project of the Holocaust Center at Kean College of New Jersey. I'm very pleased that Mrs. Rae Kushner has consented to come to Kean College today to discuss with me some of her insights and memories into the years of the Holocaust. Mrs. Kushner thanks you very much for coming here. Could you tell me a little bit about when you were born, the town that you were born in Europe and a little bit about the nature of life in the town that you came from.

A:I was born in North Poland, Novogradok. We had a population of about 25,000.

Q:Total Population?

A:Total. Six Thousand were Jews. We lived a comfortable life, a quiet life. Most of the Jews were religious. When it was the Shabbat, we all used to close the stores, we used to go to the synagogue. We had private schools to learn Hebrew. We had a couple of Yeshivas. We had a nice cultural life. After the war broke out the Germans brought in 24,000 Jews from the other small towns and put them in our town.

Q:What year were you born in?

A:I was born in 1923. We had orphanages. We had hospitals, a Jewish home for the aged.

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Q:How large was your family?

A: Our family was our father, Naum, my mother, Hinda, and four kids, three daughters, Esther, Lisa, and me, and one son, Chonon. The whole family was maybe 200 people. My father had seven sisters, one brother, my mother was one of four children. Unfortunately, no one but my father and sister survived. I had just two cousins left after the war. We felt Anti-Semitism before the war. The Polish were jealous, because the Jews were mostly the storekeepers. We dealt with the middle class people. We were not wealthy. The Jewish people had a little store, like a grocery, a fur store, a shoemaker. The Jews used to sell pots and all kinds of things, but they were just in connection with the middle class, not with the high society.

Q:What did your father do for a living?

A:My father had two fur stores and he used to sell hats, men's hats. We lived comfortably. The kids went to school, to private schools. I had a an older sister, Esther, who finished college, like university here. I was too young to start college, but I went to a private school.

Q:Your sister went to university in the town?

A:They sent her out of town. Later they sent me to a different town when I got older, to Kracow, to Bais Yaakov Seminary.

Q:Did you have a Bais Yaakov Seminary in your town?

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A:No, we didn't have a Bais Yaakov Seminary. We had a Tarbut, this is an elementary Hebrew school and we had a couple of Yeshivas.

Q:So Tarbut was for girls only?

A:For children until the 12th grade.

Q:From kindergarten through 12th grade. For girls only?

A:No, boys and girls. After the 12th grade some people went to college and some went out of town to different schools.

Q:You say your brother went to a Yeshiva?

A:My brother no. He was younger. He was young. My older sister went to college when the war broke out. I had an only brother. He was younger than me. He was then about 15 when the war broke out. And he was going to a local cheder and later he went to Tarbut. It was a coed school for Jewish kids.

Q:How many children were in the school, do you remember?

A:The school I think had about 200 children. The whole problem started in 1939. The war broke out and Russia came to us. We were not too happy, because the Russians took away everything. They nationalized all of the stores and took the richer people to Siberia. This was a tragedy at the time, everybody was afraid to go to Siberia. Luckily, the people that they took away to

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Siberia were still alive after the war. They came back. We were considered wealthy and they wanted to take us away but someone told my mother that one Saturday night the Russians were going to come for us. My mother took all of the four children and she hid us in different houses of poor people so that the Russians should not get us. No one was home on Saturday night. The Russians took the people and put them in wagons. Then they put them on cattle trains and sent them to Siberia. They took only the wealthy, the poor people they left in town. Now I wish that the Russians had taken us too. After the agony, the whole war, the people who were taken away were the lucky ones. But who knew what there was going to come from Germany? Who knew that the Germans were going to kill us?

Q:Now, how old were you in 1939?

A:In 1939 I was 16 years old.

Q:Were you aware of what was happening in Europe and Germany prior to 1939 when Hitler rose to power, before the actual beginning of the invasion of Poland?

A:We didn't know so much. Later, we found out. We knew that there was anti-Semitism. There used to come a holiday, the Polish people used to say Jews go to Palestine, you don't have a place here, but we didn't pay attention. This was a small element of people. May the 3rd was a Polish holiday. So the Polish came and said, "What are you doing here? Go to Palestine. It's not your country." But nobody paid attention.

Q:When did that start?

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A: This was in 1935, 1936, and 1937. A few Jews, friends of my father's who had stores left everything and went to Palestine. They said to my father and mother, "Sell everything and run." But we had a problem. We didn't know where to run. There was no Israel like there is today. There was no place that you could legally go to. It was very hard to get a visa to the United States; it would take years and years. For a family with small kids to pick themselves up and go it was very hard. But a few families left to Palestine and they stayed alive. One man's wife just died. She was 95. They went through very hard times in Palestine too. She was shot once; he was shot. It was not Israel today. We felt the Anti-Semitism. We felt something was coming, but we couldn't help ourselves. The doors of the world were closed to us. You know how hard it was to get to Israel? Boys and girls used to sit in a camp for three or four years before they could go to Palestine. To go to America was harder. You sent your papers and you waited for years before you could get a visa.

Q: So your father was making attempts in 1935, 1936?

A: Yes. My father remained unmarried and stayed with his sister here in the United States. Her name was Leah Gross. We felt threatened but we couldn't do anything. Some people came into our town from South Poland. The Germans were in South Poland in 1939. They told us stories. They told us, "they're killing Jews." We didn't believe them. We said, "What kind of people would do that." They told us a story that Jews had to open up a grave and later the Germans put the Jews who dug the grave into the grave alive and killed them. People were confused and they wanted to run to Russia, but by that time you could not run anywhere. In 1941, the German came into our town and took us over. On the Shabbat the Germans came with airplanes, the bombs started to fall, the war against Russia had started and the city was on fire. We saw dead people lying on fallen electrical wires and everyone started to the



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suburb of the town. We were sitting with Polish farmers listening to the radio. The bombs stopped and an announcement came over the radio that all Jews should come back to town. The Germans told us, "Don't be afraid. You're going to be safe and we will be good to you."

Q: This was in 1941?

A: 1941. The Germans told us to go home and to go back to work. All the Jews went back to their homes. Many homes were destroyed by the bombs so those that did not have a home moved in with someone else. We settled down. After four or five weeks the Germans announced that we had to wear the yellow star. So we put it on and they gave us orders.

Q: You were 17 years old?

A: Eighteen then. The Germans gave us orders to put on the yellow star to show that we were Jews. We were not allowed to go on the sidewalk; we had to go in the middle of street. It didn't bother us that much because except for that, things were normal. We had our homes; we went to work.

Q: Was there any discussion in your family?

A: There were discussions. We couldn't go any place. People running to Russia were being killed. My brother, Chonon, took his bike and wanted to run away to Russia. My mother started to cry. She heard that a friend's son was killed on the way to Russia. She didn't let him run away. We were confused. You know what the problem was? The people remembered the Germans from the first war. The Germans were good to the Jews then. The Jews made a

living and the Germans had left us alone. Who could understand and who could think that such a thing would happen to us? Nobody imagined that people would do such things to other people. When we came back from the suburbs our house was still standing. But, we moved into another house. Maybe my parents thought we could hide that way.

Q:Your family was together for the entire time when you were in the suburbs?

A:All together, yes. A month after went back to our houses, the Germans told the Jews to gather in one place. It was on Saturday. We were told to take only what we could carry and to leave all our other belonging in the house. That Friday night my mother lit Shabbat candles and I remember she was crying. One candle went out. She said, "Oh, God! That's a bad sign." The next morning the Jews were told to leave their houses. Saturday morning we packed and went to the gathering place with other Jews. Then the Germans brought in Jews from the surrounding small towns. Ten miles away from us was a little town, Koralicze, where my husband Joe, was born. Twenty miles away was Dvoritz, Mir, and Jettel. Six thousand Jews from out town were gathered with twenty-four thousand Jews from other small towns. We became thirty thousand Jews. The Germans gathered us in one suburb where farming families used to live. The Germans announced. "You will settled in this place." The ghetto. The Germans made some of the Jewish people the leaders. The Jewish leader had to tell the other Jews what to do. We organized ourselves, We lived twenty families in one house; one on top of another. But, we were happy that we were alive. We couldn't realize what was going to happen next.

Q:When you say that there were a number of leaders in the town, are you talking about the Judenrat?

A: Yes, the Germans made some of the Jewish people leaders. Nobody wanted to belong, but they didn't have a choice. The Judenrat had a tough job. Whenever the Germans gave them new orders they needed to make sure they were obeyed. One Saturday, the Germans came asked for 50 nice looking girls, young girls. They needed 50 girls to work. I was among the girls. All the mothers started to cry. They didn't want to let the girls go because they knew there was some danger involved.

Q: Do you remember the year?

A: This was 1941, right after the Germans invaded. The Germans took the 50 girls to the town square. Every town had a square where the people used to take walk, usually on a Saturday. On Saturdays all of the Jewish people would walk in the square. The Germans took us to the square and there was music playing, a whole orchestra. The Germans had gathered all of the intelligent people together. There were maybe 100 or 150 doctors, lawyers, professors, and teachers together. The German shot them as the music was playing. The blood was running on the square on the stones. We, the 50 girls, were supposed to wash the blood from the stones. We put the dead bodies on a wagon. The heads of the people were hanging off the back of the wagon. We knew these people. The music continued to play and we washed the blood off the stones of the square. The Germans had a ball in the square. They were dancing in the square.

Q: In the selection of these intelligent individuals that you identified, was the Judenrat involved in that selection process?

A: The Germans called out the names. They said, "Mr. Gurewitz, I want Mr. Gurewitz today." They knew who the people were. The Germans had come to them and asked for ten doctors, for twenty lawyers, for teachers. The Germans gave them an order. What could they do? And nobody expected them to be shot. The Judenrat thought that maybe the Germans were going to give them jobs. Nobody knew. When the people found out what the Germans did, they got very scared and confused. Everyday the Germans took us, the young people, out of the ghetto to work. The Germans gave us bread they gave us food. Sometimes we could smuggle some food back into the ghetto. We lived like animals but we were alive. On New Year's Eve, the Germans came to the Judenrat and asked for twenty young, handsome boys. Among the boys chosen was my brother, my only brother Chonon. In our ghetto, the water pipes would sometimes freeze. The Germans were having a ball in the Governors's Mansion that night and they wanted the Jewish boys to keep a fire going under the pipes so that would not freeze and so that they would have water and heat for the party. The Germans were dancing, eating, and drinking. Some of them got drunk. One of the German said, "Let's kill the twenty Jews that are here." So they went down to where the Jewish boys were and started to shoot at the boys. The boys fell into the fire. We found out that the boys were shot right away. News in the ghetto traveled very fast. The next day as the Germans were taking us to work my mother ran out of the group to find out if someone was alive.

Q: Do you remember who came back and told you that this happened?

A: We knew. Everyone knew that the boys would not come back. That's why there was crying from the mothers and fathers when the boys were taken. They cried, "Don't take my son. He will never come back." They had a feeling that the boys would not come back.

Q:Did anyone try to hide?

A:Hide? You could not hide. The Germans would kill all of the Jews. It was risky. If you did not give the Germans what they wanted, they would kill everyone with machine guns. Would that have been better? My mother ran out of the ghetto with my father they ran to the Governor's Mansion. Surrounding the Governor's Mansion were empty houses that had been bombed. They ran around the back of the houses. They met a gentile woman who told them, "Don't go. All the Jewish boys are dead." But, my mother went in anyway to search. All of a sudden, my mother heard a cry and screaming, "Oi, oi," and begging for help. My mother went over and there lying was my brother, burned from the fire, but he was alive. My mother went running to the Jewish leaders in the ghetto to get help. They told my mother to get the things that she needed to go to work with. The Jewish leader that she went to for help wanted the Germans to think that they were on their way back to work. They then snuck away to the empty house and wrapped my brother in straw and paper and brought him into the ghetto. He was in terrible pain; we hid him in the attic. Two days later, the Germans counted the bodies of the boys that had been shot. One was missing, so they came to the ghetto and said, "Where is the Jew that is missing." No one answered. Anyway, without doctors and without medicine my brother became healthy. He suffered for 6 months but he was alive and healthy and he went back to work.

Q:Were there any doctors who could have helped?

A:Maybe there was one doctor in the ghetto. The doctors, lawyers, and teachers were murdered in the beginning. The Germans were afraid that the intellectuals would organize a rebellion.

Q:When the Germans came and they said one Jew was missing ---

A:They were looking around the ghetto.

Q:They were looking around?

A:Oh, yes. The Germans told the Jews in the ghetto that they were going to do something if they did not find the missing boy. The Germans scared the people, but the Jews were strong and they said, "We don't know where he is." They looked around in all of the houses, but they would not find him.

Q:Was the Judenrat afraid that if they didn't turn in, for example, you brother that ---

A:They were scared. They were afraid. We were all afraid but we took the responsibility. We said what's going to happen to us is going to happen. My brother was alive and we went back to work, cleaning the bricks.

Q:Inside the ghetto?

A:No. Out of the ghetto? The German used to come to pick us up. They only took the young people in the ghetto. We used to go to the bombed house and we had to re-cement the brick, put the glass together, and clean up everything that the fires destroyed. One morning, when everyone was sleeping the Germans surrounded the whole ghetto. They surrounded us from all sides and they took out four thousand people; mostly the old and sick and those that

thought would cause trouble. They took them three miles from the town to Skredlewo and told the people to dig a grave. The Germans then killed them, they killed with machine guns. Four thousand people were gone. The people left in the ghetto became panicky. What was going to happen to us? The Germans were smart. They knew how to make it so that we would not panic or cause trouble. The next morning, they gathered the people that were left in the ghetto and said, "We killed the old people, the people that cannot work. But, you are young so you are going to be protected. We need you to work, and we're going to give you everything because you are talented people." Some older people were also left because they had a trade. My father was left because he was a furrier. Carpenters were left. The intelligent people were the first ones that the Germans killed because they were afraid that would form a resistance group. The Germans said, "We are going to move you from here. The people who are talented and the people that are capable to work, we have a place for you. You will get double portions of bread. You will be treated better. Everything will be fine. "We felt happier." The Germans took us and moved us to a big courthouse (in Polish, it's "the Sud"), like the courthouse in Elizabeth, New Jersey. It was very big, built before the war. They told us that this was our new town. They then gathered us in the square near the courthouse and shoved us into a building on the side of the square. People started to choke.

Q:How many people?

A:It must have been about twelve thousand people.

Q:Were you together with your whole family?

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A: Yes. I was together with my whole family -- my father, my mother, my two sisters and my brother. The Germans came into the building and surrounded us. They stood there with their white gloves, dresses handsome in their Nazi uniforms. They came into the building and said, "You go to the right and you go to the left." The right as to die and the left was to live.

Q: Did you know that?

A: We didn't know anything. When the Germans said, "you to the left, you to the right." I was standing with my father and the rest of the family. People were crying and screaming. A German said to us, "You all go to the right." My mother started to screaming, crying. I went over to the German and said, "I'm young I want to live. I want to work. Leave us on the other side." He kicked me in the behind with this boot and walked away. I fell down the stairs of the building. We could see there ten trucks in the square loaded with people. The Germans finished leading the people inside and drove them away about two miles from the square.

Q: Let me interrupt you just for a second. When you said they were taking people to the right and to the left. Was there any pattern that you observed in the selection and in who was going to the right?

A: He looked at you. If the German looked at you and liked you, he told you to the left. If he didn't like you, he told you to the right.

Q: So it was clear to you that going to the right --



A: To the right was going to die and to the left was to live.

Q: That was clear?

A: People knew. People in the building were crying. We saw the trucks and heard the screaming on the trucks. My father, my mother, my sister, my brother and I were sent into the square. Before we went, the Germans asked us for our belongings. There was a pot that you threw everything into. Rings, jewelry, money. When we went into the square -- this is unbelievable to understand -- rabbi, young women holding their babies by their breasts, old men and women were all screaming and praying to God. They were screaming Shema Yisrael and all kinds of prayers. They knew that the trucks were taking them to their graves. The Germans took them all and killed them. My family was next in line to go on the trucks. It took time to load up the trucks. There was so much screaming. A German came over to one of the heads of the Judenrat, he lives now in Israel, and said, "I need 40 furriers. Give me their families." The Judenrat started to pick the people who were standing in front of the trucks. He didn't care if they were furriers or not. We did not know what he was picking people, so as this was happening, my mother, who was a very smart woman, said: "Kids, run. You don't have a choice. It is better to be shot here than to dig your own grave. Run or we will all be killed. Run that way, maybe one of us is going to be alive." My older sister, Esther, ran to the building where the people were. As we were being rescued, a Polish boy, who was a poor farm boy before the Germans took over, saw my sister run into the building. He went after her and dragged her out of the building. We saw her walking to the trucks. We saw her going to die as we were walking away to live. She was killed at that time. It was December, about the 24th, 1941. It was the first shechitah. The Germans took away at that time about four thousand Jews. Small babies, young people, old people, rabbis; everyone

went. I had a friend who had a twin brother. The Germans told her to stay on the left but she said she wanted to stay with her brother. So they sent them both to the right. Most people wanted to go as a family. The Germans did not care. They took whole families. The Germans put us back to work. They told us that now that all of the bad Jews were away, we were going to get more food and that we would live.

Q:Do you have any idea how many Jews were left in the town after that particular day?

A:It was not a town, it was a ghetto.

Q:In the ghetto.

A:In the ghetto, there were maybe two or three thousand Jews left.

Q:Out of a total population of approximately thirty thousand?

A:Thirty thousand. The three thousand Jews that were left were all out to work. We sewed hats and furs. The Germans gave us break and we cooked potatoes, so we had food. We thought we would be all right. Then they came again. The Germans surrounded us again. This time they wanted the small children. There were about three thousand children, so there must have been a total of about six thousand Jews in the ghetto. The Germans came at 4:00 o'clock in the morning. Everyone was sleeping. They woke us up and said that they were going to take the small children to a kindergarten; a special school just for them. We knew the children were would not come back. I can never forget the picture of the mothers and father kneeling on their hands and knees begging the Germans to leave their children alone. One German

stood with his white gloves on and pulled a child away from his mother. The mother would not let go of his hand. The Germans shoved her and told her that she could go with her child. I had an uncle, Chaim Leibowitz, who had two children. We knew what was going to happen to the children. We had a storage place that was filled with newspapers. We took his two children and eight others and hid them, in the back of the papers. We told the children to be quiet and we kept them hidden for a couple of days. The Germans took away the other children but those ten behind the newspapers were saved. The Germans were not satisfied. They were not happy that maybe some children survived; that the Jews tricked them. They came back three days later and surrounded the ghetto again. They brought in big dogs, Germans Shepherds. They sniffed around until they found the children. They even found some children that were hidden by their parents in an attic. The Germans gathered the few children that were left and took them about a mile away. The Germans did use bullets to kill them because bullets were expensive. They choke them with some kind of white powder. The parents cried and screamed. Can you imagine the crying and screaming of parents? This was the end of the Jewish children in the ghetto. My uncle has two children. A son, 10 years old, and a daughter about eight years old. He stood with his wife and watched as the Germans killed them. After the Germans killed the children, the rest of the people in the ghetto started to think about running away. Some of the people had poison. One druggist that I knew had poison prepared for him and his wife. He did not want to wait for a bullet. Some people ran away from the ghetto. It was not easy because the ghetto was surrounded with wires, high wires and the wires were electric. If you touched the wire, you were killed.

Q: There's only one entrance to the ghetto?

A: There was only one entrance. The German army stood right in front of it. We had some contact with the gentile people. The gentiles came into the ghetto to pick up the things we sewed -- the hats, furs, and shoes. We would bribe them with some money and they used to bring us back some bread, an onion or potatoes. A friend of mine, who now lives in Saddle River, New Jersey, had a beautiful sister. This girl was so beautiful, a Miss America, and so smart. She ran out of the ghetto with a gentile. The Germans caught her right away. They brought her back to the ghetto and they hung her on a tree. They cut off her breasts. They pushed in a stick, I can't tell you where, but you know where. We were all so scared, we could not move. No one tried to leave the ghetto for a long time after that. They caught another girl after that. They killed her too. I just saw her sister in Israel. We knew that the Germans were going to kill us all. We lived day by day. One day we got together and thought about just opening the ghetto door and running. Whoever would live would live, and whoever would die would die.

Q: Do you remember what date that was? Not the exact date, but the month?

A: It was the end of 1942, the beginning of 1943.

Q: Was somebody in charge of getting everybody together?

A: Yes, there were a couple of boys from the Judenrat who organized things. One of the mothers, whose son was one of the organizers, started to cry, "What? You're going to open the doors? They are going to kill you for organizing this." The boy was killed anyway. I don't know if someone told the Germans what was happening or not because one morning they came and

arrested all of the Judenrat. Maybe a Jew told them. Maybe they thought that if they told, they could save themselves. You can't blame anyone. It was not a normal time of life.

Q:I'm just going to interrupt. You said there was a gathering of people that came together to discuss escaping from the ghetto.

A:Not everybody, just the top leaders.

Q:Were you there or anybody from your family?

A:My brother was there. The young leaders felt that we were going to die anyway and that maybe we should try to kill the Germans and run. It was better to die running than to dig your own grave. The mother of the boy who was the organizer kept crying and screaming, "I'm going to go to the Germans and I'll tell them you're going to try to escape." Some families in the ghetto tried to build a hiding place. We lived in a room with ten other families. We dug a hole under the floor. We could not put the dirt outside, so we built a double wall to put the dirt into. We knew that when the Germans came again, they would take our parents, so we thought that we would hide our parents in the hole under the floor. We were afraid for our parents. We knew that the Germans needed workers, so we knew that they would not kill the young ones first. But you never knew what would happen. You know why? The Germans came all of sudden. They came at 4 o'clock, when everyone was sleeping. They surrounded us and started yelling. "Everyone out." They came into the rooms with dogs and guns and chased us all outside in the backyard. A girl who now lives in the United States ran into the courthouse and hid inside the toilet. She sat like that for two or three days. The Germans started to say you to the right and you to the left. They loaded the trucks. Out of thirty

thousand Jews, maybe three hundred were caught and shot. The Germans had plenty of help from our Polish "friends." They killed us too. If a Pole found a Jew in the woods, he turned him over to the Germans. If the Poles had helped us, a lot of Jews would be alive today. Some Polish people took in Jews, if they could get paid. But how many of us had money? My husband, Joe, had run away from the ghetto. He dug a hole in the woods for himself, his sisters, and his brother. They lived in the hole for two or three years.

Q:When did he do that?

A:He did this in 1942. He dug a hole in the forest. It was not easy. He lived like an animal. During the day he lived in this hole, a grave, and at night, he went out with a gun to get food from the Poles. We had the hiding place for my parents ready. The Germans came at 4 o'clock in the morning. The older people got confused and didn't have time to go down into the hole we had dug for them. They took my mother outside. Again, the Germans said, "Right, left, right left." They stood there giving their orders with white gloves on. They were very polite. These were intelligent learned people. Before they took my mother outside, she told us, "children, hold on Maybe one of you will be alive. Maybe one of you will be left. Hold on together." My father, brother, sister (Lisa) and I watched through the window of the building as they took my mother away. They took her. They took my uncle's wife, my cousin's mother. We couldn't hide anyone. There was no time. We never knew when the Germans would come. My mother was killed in front of us. The Germans threw the bodies into a grave that was a half mile from the ghetto. We saw it with our own eyes. We screamed and cried. The Germans shot at us. This was 1943. It was the fourth or fifth time that the Germans came to kill us. They did a good job cleaning us out. Out of thirty thousand Jews

there were now three hundred or three hundred and fifty Jews left in the ghetto of Novogradok.

Q: Before you were talking about the fact that you essentially had experienced five different killings and the last one involved your mother?

A: Yes. They killed my mother and about 2000 other people at that time. The Germans surrounded us and told us to stay in line because they were to give us bread. And then again they started, you to the right and you to the left. It was the same thing over again. They took away my mother and my aunt. My uncle, Chaim, started to screaming and crying. The Germans took him outside and order two Jews to hit him with sticks and they did. My uncle could not take it anymore. They Germans had already killed his children and now they were going to kill his wife. How much can a person take?

Q: They were not the Jewish policeman were they?

A: No, just two Jews. The Germans stood on either side of the men and watched how they hit my uncle. Who would think that a Jew would hit another Jew? Every day someone was punished. The Germans took everyone out into the courtyard and they selected someone to be beaten. The rest of us had to stand and watch the beatings. We watched and cried. This was the German's way of showing us what would happen if we did not behave. It was worse if you tried to escape from the ghetto. My sister-in-law (Yussel) who now lives in Australia went with her husband to the gates of the ghetto. It was the middle of the night. They were supposed to meet a Polish man who was going to help them escape. She got out but her husband was caught.

Q:Did they have children.

A:No not then. They had two children after the war. A son and a daughter. They have four grandchildren. They were a young couple at the time. If the Germans caught someone leaving the ghetto, they brought the person back into the ghetto and either shot them or hung them on a tree. They did this in front of all of us as lesson so that we would behave. I knew a few people who tried to get out of the ghetto during the day. The gentiles came into the ghetto every day to bring us work to do. The Jews tried to sneak out as the gentiles were coming in. Very few escaped that way. They were usually caught by either the Germans or the Poles. Anyone who was caught was brought back into the ghetto. The rest of their family was then called out. The Germans either shot or hung them, in front of their family or else they killed the whole family in front the of person who tired to escape. The whole family was punished, if one member of family tried to escape. It was not easy. You were responsible for other human beings, because if the Germans caught you, they often killed others too. So we were locked in. Two hundred and fifty of us were left in a the ghetto of 30,000.

Q:So you were with your father?

A:I was with my father, sister, and brother. My mother, Hinda, and my older sister, Esther, had been killed. Out of thirty thousand Jews, maybe a thousand had escaped from the ghetto. Some ran into the woods, other were hidden by Poles. A few of the Polish farmers would hide Jews for money. But, who had money? In our neighborhood not too many Poles felt sorry for us. But sometimes, if they knew you and you could convince them, they helped you out



by hiding you overnight. We heard that Jews who were in the woods were not starving and that they were getting along. We could not imagine how you could live through the winter in the woods with the snow and the cold and the wet weather, but we decided that anything was better than staying here waiting for a bullet. So we organized a group and decided to build a tunnel. There were 70 young boys left in the ghetto. There were also three or four elderly people left and the rest of us were young girls, like me. My father was one of the elderly people left. He was about 50 or 55 years old at the time and he just died last year. Anyway, the 70 young boys started to dig a tunnel and everyone helped them as much as they could. We did know what to do with the dirt, so we piled it up between the walls and under our beds. We dug this tunnel for three months. It was very small and you had to crawl on your hands and knees to get through it. One night we decided it was time to get out of the ghetto.

Q: All the digging was done during the night.

A: During the night. In the daytime, we went to work. The Germans used the Jews to scrub the floors, to make shoes, to make clothing. It was like a factory. The Germans brought the work into the ghetto in the morning and then they used to pick it up at night. The Germans were always around us, so we could not do any digging during the day. It was decided that the elderly people would be the last one out of the tunnel. We were afraid that if one of them had a heart attack or got sick in the middle of tunnel, everyone else would get stuck inside. The seventy young boys would go out first. My brother, Chonon, was one of them. We found out that a Jewish boy who was from my husband's town, Koralicze, didn't like the idea of us leaving the ghetto. He started to say, "Why are you doing this. It is going to be worse if you run away. They are going to catch you and kill us all."

Q:How old was this boy?

A:He was young. Some of the boys who dug the tunnel choked him to death because they were afraid he was going to tell the Germans what was going on in the ghetto so that they would let him live. The Germans would have killed him anyway. The instinct to live made people do anything and everything. The boys took him into the tunnel and choked him

Q:How old was he?

A:He was about 17 or 18, maybe 19. The Germans were suspicious. They knew something was going on. They often convinced other Jews to tell them what was going on in the ghetto. They promised them all sorts of things for information. We could not risk anybody asking questions. To get out of this tunnel, you needed to be very careful. The Germans were around us all of the time. After the boy was killed we decided it was time to escape. We waited for an evening when there would be thunder and heavy rain. One of the boys went up to the room of the house where we all were and pulled some tin off the roof so that there would be a banging noise. We wanted noise so that the Germans could not hear us as we crawled into the tunnel. The boys had asked me and my sister to go out of the tunnel with them. We were young and healthy, we had helped build the tunnel and they wanted us to be one of the first ones out. But we decided to stay with our father in the back of the line. We wanted to stay with him. We felt that whatever happened to my father, would also happen to us. It was risky. If the first ones got out of the tunnel and the Germans found out that they escaped, they would come into the tunnel and shoot the rest of us. We were prepared to die. It was thundering. It was pouring so hard, you not see in front of you. We had a long rope

that each of us held on to and we lined up to go out of the tunnel. We hoped the rope would keep us all together. We were in groups and in each group there was a person who knew which way to run when we got out of the tunnel. We thought we would all be together in the forest. But the willpower to live is so strong.

Q: Was there one particular person who was the leader?

A: We all helped, the boys and the girls. The 70 boys were supposed to go out of the tunnel first and rest of us were supposed to follow them. But oh what happened to us! It was dark. It was pouring and thundering. The boys got out of the tunnel. They became confused and started to run in different directions. Maybe it was the excitement of freedom or the instinct of survival that made them run off instead of staying together. They lost one another. When my father, sister, and I got out of the tunnel, we did not know where to go. We followed a Jewish farmer boy who knew the way to the farms in the area. He also knew a lot of the gentiles who owned the farms. He was our angel.

Q: The original plan was for everybody to hold onto the rope when you came out?

A: Yes. But what happened was that once you got out of the tunnel, you could not think and you lost control of your senses. Nobody was thinking about what was going to happen next. They were happy to be out. Everybody just wanted to run to safety. A cousin of mine (Shaul Gorodinski) who died last year of a heart attack, escaped with the group of 70 boys. We heard that when the Germans came into the ghetto the next day, and realized that the Jews had escaped, they brought in an army and threw bombs on the house and into the tunnel.

Q:Do you remember the month?

A:It was the fall of 1943. I was in the woods for nine months.

Q:How did you know what happened in town when the Germans came to the town?

A:The Poles told us later on. The 70 boys who built the tunnel were wandering around the forest near town. They did not know where to go, they were lost. The next day the Germans caught them all and killed them in the square of the town. They never were rescued.

Q:So the only people who actually got out of the tunnel were the 70 boys?

A:No, we all got out. All 250 of us.

Q:Everybody got out of the tunnel?

A:Everybody got out. The Germans caught and killed almost all of the 70 boys who built the tunnel. Maybe two or three survived. The Germans were mad that they Jews had outsmarted them. An army came to the ghetto and bombed it. They were afraid to go into the tunnel so they bombed that too. Everyone ran out of the tunnel. All 250 people. It was dark and raining. We picked such a night on purpose. We all got out.

Q:That night was spent outside in the woods?

A: That night we ran and ran. We ran in different directions into the woods. No one stayed in the town. The plan was that we would all be together. But what happened was that once people got out of the tunnel and they saw freedom they became panicky and ran. They did not wait for the rest of us to come out. Whoever got out let go of the rope and ran. We were lucky. In front of my father, sister, and me was a farmer boy. He also started to run, but I grabbed his pants and I said, "You're not going without us. We will live together or we will die together." He started to cry. "What do you want from me? I have a gentile woman who wants to take me in. If she sees us all, she'll call the Germans and we'll all die." I said, "She'll call the Germans and we'll die together." He was a good boy and he took pity on us. It is on account of him that I am here today. I wish I knew where he went after the war. I would help him in any way I could. He was young and scared but he took us with him. As I was holding on to him, my father started to scream. "I cannot breathe." I took some water from a puddle and gave it to him to drink. I put one hand on the farm boy. My sister Lisa, took my father under one arm and I took his other arm and the four of us walked and walked until we reached a Polish house. the woman opened the door and recognized us immediately. "Ah, Kushner, you had the fur stores. I'll give you some bread, water, and onions, but you cannot stay here. You must go." She was scared the Germans would kill her if she hid Jews.

Q: How far was this from town?

A: This was maybe five miles from town. That night we dragged my father for five miles. He kept on fainting, we kept on walking. The Polish woman gave us an onion and some water and we moved on. The next day we hear that the Germans came to this woman's house and found some of the Jews that she had hidden. They killed her, her husband, and the Jews. She had hidden seven or eight Jews. Everyone was killed. After we left the Polish woman, we

started to walk slowly into the woods. We hid in the bushes for ten days. From Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur we sat under bushes in the woods. The farmer boy was with us the whole time. He never left us. For ten days we sat under the bushes. There was a pouring rain the whole time. It was as if God was crying for us. We were soaked. We were wet. We had no food. Through the bushes we could see Polish boys feeding the cows. We could see people walking around free, while we say like animals in the bushes. My younger sister, Lisa, was about 15 at the time. She said, "What kind of life is this? Let them kill us already. How long can we sit like this?" We saw a light on in a farm house. We left my father sitting in the bushes, and my sister, the farm boy and I went in the middle of the night to the farm. We wanted to ask for a piece of bread to eat. We knocked on the door. The big farmer saw us. He came out carrying a big stick and by his die were two big dogs. The dogs and the farmer started to run after us. I ran away. The farm boy ran away. But, he caught my sister. The farmer knocked her over her head and shoulders with the stick. We grabbed her and ran back into the bushes. We could not live in the bushes forever. We were already there for ten days--from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur. Se we went to another little farm. The woman there knew the farm boy. She was a nice woman. She gave us something to eat and let us sleep in the barn for two nights. She brought us potatoes and buttermilk. She was afraid to keep us longer. We left there and headed further to find other farmers who would maybe help us. We knew that Jews were hiding in the woods and we knew that their leader was a man named Tuvia Bielski. Tuvia had a gathering of Jewish people in the woods. He had heard that people had run away from the ghetto, and he sent some of his men to search for any survivors. His mean had guns and ammunition had they went from farm to farm searching for Jews.

Q: You mentioned before that the Germans had caught most of the boys who had gone out through the tunnel. Did you get that information then at the time or you found this out later on?

A: No. We looked for the boys after we got out of the tunnel. We couldn't find him. Everybody had run in different directions. Later we found out from some Polish people that the boys had been caught. Two went to Israel. One was killed in the 1956 Israeli war and the other, my cousin Shaul, died later years at the age of 54 from a heart attack. My cousin was supposed to stay with my brother after they out of the tunnel. They got separated. Anyway, we stayed with the Polish woman for two days. We left and went on to another bunch of farms. Houses were two or three miles apart from one another. Went to a gentile who we knew from before the war. He recognized us and said, "Listen, I'll do everything I can for you, but you cannot stay with me." He was already hiding other Jews. Somehow Bielski's men knew that there were Jews at this farm because the wagons with the Jewish men came for us. We saw the wagons and at first got scared. We thought the Germans had found us. We cried tears of joy when we realized that the men were Jews. The men loaded us and the other Jews that the farmer had hid and took us into the woods. In the woods, it looked like graves. The Jews had dug themselves pits underground to live in. The boys would go out at night and bring back food. They did this by going to Gentile farms and threatening them with guns. The boys would bring back some meat, potatoes, onions, and bread. We had enough food.

Q: How many people were living together in the woods?

A: There were about 1000 or 1100 people in the woods. We settled down. Some people collected woods for the fire, while others did other jobs. Mostly, we watched the grounds. Some young boys would patrol the area on horses. They would watch out for other Germans and

the Poles. We were afraid if the Germans did not kill us the Polish would. We were in the woods for about nine months. Some people were there for four years.

Q:Your sister was with you?

A:My sister Lisa and my father. My brother was lost. We did not know if he was dead or alive. We could not find him after we escaped from the tunnel. After the war, we went back to our town to look for him, but we never found him.

Q:Do you remember the dates that you were in the woods together with these others?

A:We went in 1943. This was in the fall and we went home nine months later in May. Even in the woods we lived in fear. The Germans knew Jewish people were hiding in the woods, and they sent airplanes to bomb us. We moved around a lot. It was not easy. But, it was better than the ghetto and we survived. In 1944, in May, Tuvia Bielski brought us out of the woods. He brought out 1100 Jews. When the Germans started to lose the war, the woods became an even more dangerous place to be. The Germans started to hide in the woods. They were trying to hide from the Russians. The German soldiers ran away from the army and, even without orders from the SS, they still tried to kill Jews. They killed eleven Jews moments before we were liberated. Some of the boys caught three Germans and killed them. They beat them to death. They could no longer hold in their anger and it was as if they went mad. Later, the Russians came and occupied us. The Russians took all of the sick and elderly and put them in wagons and took them back to the town where we had lived. We met some Polish gentiles, they were surprised we were alive. A few even put out their hands and said, "Thank God you are alive." One asked my father about my mother. We came back



to our town. We were very heart broken. We were crying. How many of us were left? From 30,000 Jews brought to the ghetto in Novogradok, maybe 1000 or 1,100 were left.

Q: Did you actually feel that you were liberated, that the war was over?

A: The war was over, but we were not liberated. The Russians occupied our little town and started to mobilize the Jewish boys for their army. We went through the concentration camps, we went through the Holocaust, we suffered so much and now Russians started to mobilize Jewish boys to fight against Germany. And what happened? The Russians became our bosses. Some of the boys who did not want to go to the army said that they wanted to become Rabbis but the Russians did not let them go so easily because they did not trust the Jews. Some of the men became fireman and others worked in the jail so that they would have to go into the army. However, some of the boys did want to fight the German. They wanted to fight for their dead mothers, father, sisters and brothers. Maybe 200 boys willing went to the army. Tuvia's brother went to the army and he was killed. Many of Jewish boys were killed. About 750 Jewish people remained in our town. We started to go on with our lives. The first thing we did was to tend the graves. You cannot imagine what it felt like to go over to the grave where my mother was buried, to the other grave where 4,000 innocent men, women and children were buried. All killed just because they were Jewish. I fainted twice. To see this, I cannot tell you what I felt. We all wanted to run away. We wanted to run any place but Russia was in charge now and we were afraid. We could not go anywhere without a passport. Some people forged passports and ran away. But there really was nowhere to run. Nobody wanted to take us in. A group of us organized a committee that was going to try to get paper to get us in Palestine. We went to an underground organization that had helped other Jews smuggle out to Palestine. They sent two men to help us plan our escape. After 9

months of planning, everyone except for three people went to the train station. We told the Russian soldiers that we were boarding the train to Czechoslovakia because we wanted to go to fight in the Russian army against the Germans. They let us get on the train.

Q: These two people who came were from an agency you said? Do you know which one?

A: I think it was from Israel. I think it was organized by some of the Jewish leaders, but I am not really sure. It was well organized. They told us to go to the trains and not to say they were Jewish. We were to say we were Greeks or Italians going to fight the war. The Russians believed us and we left to Czechoslovakia.

Q: You were in town for approximately a year?

A: Yes, for about a year. We had troubles there too. The Russians would arrest Jews for trying to do some business. Many were given a jail sentence of seven years because they tried to buy sugar and salt. These people were later rescued. We were so broken. The Germans tried to kill us all and then Russians did not let us live either. That was our liberation. It wasn't until we settled in Italy that we really felt some sort of peace.

Q: And how did you come to Italy?

A: We got off the train in Czechoslovakia. The borders were all closed to us. So we got off the train and hid until it was dark. We then walked into the hills and smuggled through the borders. We would walk all night long and rest during the day. We walked from Czechoslovakia to Austria and then to Hungary. I met my husband in Hungary and we got married. We then

crossed the border again to Italy. We did this all on foot, all in the middle of the night so that no one would see us. We came to Italy where there were two Displaced Persons camps. One was in Cremona and the other one was in Ladispoli. We were put up in Cremona where we waited for three and a half years before getting papers for America.

Q: You were with your sister and your father?

A: With my sister, father, and husband. I got married on the way. I knew my husband, Joe, before the war. He had lived in a small town near mine. When we met again we decided to get married.

Q: You know him before?

A: Yes, We got married in a shul in Budapest, Hungary. The rabbi married twenty couples at the same time. Single boys and girls wanted to get married. We were all lost. We did not know where we were going or what we were going to do. The war left most of us alone. From my town, not one family was left intact. Everyone of us had lost someone. The largest family that survived was a mother, father, and three children. But they also had a daughter who was killed. The day after got married, we smuggled ourselves over the border into Italy. This was our honeymoon. In Italy we sat in a Displaced Persons camp. It was like being in the ghetto again. We were there for three and a half years. My oldest daughter, Linda, was born there. She is now 46 and is married. She has four children. We wanted to go to Africa, to Australia, to Israel. We would go anywhere where we could live in freedom but nobody wanted us. Nobody opened their doors to us. Nobody wanted to take us in. So for three and a half years, we waited until we finally got a visa to come to the United States. We had

family here; my father had a sister, Leah Gross and a cousin, Max Haberman, who sponsored us. They were fine people.

Q:How many people were this Displaced Persons camp?

A:There were a few a Displaced Persons camps. In ours there were about 600 people. We were in Cremona, but in Ladispoll where there was another camp, it was different. Our camp had three or four families living together in one room and we all shared on kitchen. We lived like this for three and half years.

Q:Once you got married were you separated from your father and from your sister

A:No. We went together. We were never separated. But we never found our brother. Never. We never really knew for sure if he was dead, so we kept on looking for him, hoping that he somehow survived after he got out of the tunnel. We thought that maybe he had been caught by the Russians. We came to the United States.

Q:How did you finally come to the United States? You were in the Displaced Persons camp until what year?

A:In 1949 we came to the United States and we came because cousins of our sent us papers. the HIAS helped us a lot in the Displaced Persons camp.

Q:How did they help you in the Displaced Persons camp?

A: In the camps they brought us food. We couldn't work there because we were not citizens. You could sell and buy things. But, you could not work to make money, so how much could we buy or sell? In 1949, we got papers, then the visa came for us to go to the United States. The HIAS organization asked us if we wanted to go through them or by ourselves. We did not need their help, but they offered. We didn't really need our cousins' help either. We were young and able to work. My husband was 26, I was 24. My father was 55 and my sister was 20. We all planned to work.

Q: You came to New York?

A: New York. We rented a furnished room and we moved in there. I watched my daughter, cooked and cleaned. My husband, father, and sister went to work. Later, we got an apartment in Brooklyn on St. John's Place, near Eastern Parkway. Our cousins helped us in the beginning to get settled, but once everyone went to work we stood on our own two feet. Our second child, a son, Murray was born. We then had two more children, another son, Charles, and daughter, Esther. Linda is named after my mother, Hinda, and my husband's mother, Chana. Murray is named after my husband's father, Moishe. Charles is named after my brother, Chonon, and Esther is named after my sister Esther. They are all educated. They all finished college and the boys finished law school. My husband started his business thirty years ago. Thank God we were successful and could provide for ourselves and our children. American was very good to us. We love America.

Q: How did you happen to come to New Jersey?

A: Well, my husband worked in New Jersey and he used to travel from New York, so we decided to move. We brought up our children in Elizabeth, New Jersey. We gave our hearts and soul to the children. We shared all our sorrow with them. We shared all our happiness with them.

Q: Did you talk to your children while they were growing up about what had happened to you and your family?

A: Yes, yes. They knew everything and they tell their children also. My granddaughter who is now at N.Y.U. has read many books on the Holocaust and she is active in some organizations. I just want to say that maybe if we had the State of Israel, so many people would not have been killed. Maybe they could have saved a million or two million people. Maybe the whole madness would not have happened if we had a place to go. The Ukrainians had a place to go; the Poles had a place to go. How many Poles and Germans escaped after the war to Brazil, the United States, Australia, and Argentina? For the Jews, the doors were closed. We never understood that. Even President Roosevelt kept the doors closed. Why? The boat, St. Louis, was turned back. What was the world afraid of? I don't understand. Thank God, now we live normal lives with our family and friends. But, this question always stays on my mind. At a party, the Europeans always drift to one another. We always ask one another, where were you, where did you live, how did you get out? Somehow the conversation always leads to the concentration camps and the ghetto. Our children lived a little bit of our lives. I don't know if it is so healthy for them, because our kids are more serious than American children. It is unbelievable that we had the strength to survive such a fire. Nobody believed that we ever got married, have children, and grandchildren. When a European has a simcha, we all rejoice. We live our lost youth through our children. We had no youth, our early years were spent hiding. Our middle years were spent rebuilding.

Q:What were your feelings when you came to the United States? All of a sudden you're in the United States. How long was the trip to the United States?

A:We came on a boat, a Polish boat. It took three or four weeks to come to America.

Q:Did you feel secure at that time? Did you feel that in fact your life was not in danger anymore?

A:We felt relief. We were depressed in the Displaced Persons camp. After going through what we did we thought that the world would greet us with open hands. Instead, we were put in another ghetto. Going to America was the start of a new life. We did not feel secure because we did not know what was ahead of us. But, it has to be a better than what we came from. All I can tell you is that we as Jews must do all we can for the State of Israel. We must have a country of our own, a homeland for Jews.

Q:Have you ever gone back to Poland?

A:I will never go there. A friend of mine from Saddle River went back to our town. She brought back pictures of the graves. What is left to see? Broken grave markers and two Jews who take care of the cemetery.

Q:Let me ask you a question. We were talking about this a little before. Many of the survivors are beginning to tell the stories, to recount their experiences. Fifteen years ago, ten years ago, people were not talking about their experiences. Can you explain why there is more of a desire now to relate the experiences that people went through in the Holocaust?

A: We couldn't talk. We were choked. We could not think about this. We tried not to think about it.

We came to a new country, we were raising our children and worrying about how to make a living. We wanted to establish normal lives and leave the horrors behind us. Now, we are ready to talk and we realize that if we don't tell our story and establish something to commemorate what happened it will be lost. There is a society meeting from my town once a year and every year that I go there are fewer people there. We are slowly dying out and it is our obligation that our stories be told. History should record what happened to us. People should know what happened to us. If we don't tell the story now, who knows what people will say in twenty years. Maybe they will say it never happened. Now that we still have the strength and we have the power, we have to make sure that the world does not forget. Governments have to make sure that another Hitler does not rise to power. Protestants, Catholics, and even Polacks and Germans should not be killed because of their religion. Blacks should not be killed because of the color of their skin. We are all people. I tell my children this. It hurts when I see Nazis marching with swastikas in front of the White House or see the Ku Klux Klan parade. It is scary and it is painful.

Q: Do you ever think about where the Jewish community was in the United States? Whether the Jewish community could have done more?

A: We felt that they did not do enough. Maybe they couldn't do more. I know there were delegations to the president. If Americans had bombed the gas chambers, it could have been better. That way even some Jews were killed, maybe others would have been saved. Awhile ago I went to a show in New York With my husband. Someone tapped him on the back and said, "are you Joe?" He said, "Yes." The man asked my husband if he recognized him. My husband



said, "No." The man then reminded my husband that he was the first person he saw when he got out of the concentration camp. He weighed 60 pounds at the time and was shivering. My husband gave him a zloty and told him to shave and buy a piece of bread. He never forgot my husband. He now lives in Long Island, has a son and two grandchildren. Our life is a miracle. We survived the camps, the ghettos, and the woods. It is a miracle that we lived to become normal people. Our lives are miracles, our children and grandchildren are miracles. We never dreamed that out of the ashes and rubble, we would survive to lead normal lives and see and build the next generation.