

[MUSIC PLAYING] Good afternoon. My name is Marcia Weissberg. And I'm a member of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at the Sterling Library at Yale University. Sharing the interview with me is Ruth Harris. And we are privileged to welcome Mr. Paul Schmelzer, a survivor presently living in Elizabeth, who has generously volunteered to give testimony about his experience before, during, and after the Holocaust. Welcome, Mr. Schmelzer.

My name is Paul Schmelzer. I was born in Gwozdziec, Poland. We were a family of six brothers and three sisters. We had a business. My parents had a business, a wholesale retail grocery. I was going to school. And after school, I also started working and helping out my parents. I was living there till 1937. In 1937, the Poles took me to the Polish army, which I was there two years. After the two years I had to come home.

The war broke out in 1939. The war broke out with Germany. I went into the German war. After a couple of weeks of the whole war existed with Poland, I became a war prisoner. I was in a German war prison. After the war prison, by luck, I came out from the war prison and I came home. When I came home to my hometown, the Russians were there because they split Poland with Germany. And my hometown was occupied from the Russians.

And after we were with the Russians for a year or so, the war broke out between Germany and Russia. When the war broke out, the Germans came in. And a half a year later, they made a ghetto. They put all the Jews together. In two streets, they put together the whole town. And after a couple of months, they made judenfrei, which means they took out all the Jews from the ghetto, and they brought them up to Kolomyia. In Kolomyia, I was for a while also in ghetto.

From the ghetto, they took us out and they put us into a slave camp from the Wehrmacht. And I was there for the summer period, which we worked on the fields. After the summer, they took us out from there. And they wanted to take us to Belzec. Luckily, I escaped into the woods. I was for a while in the woods. And I didn't know what happened to all the people in my hometown. And then I decide I went to a town, Gorodenka. And from Gorodenka, I came to Tovste.

In 1941, I came to Tovste, which I spent in Tovste one year. And it was not yet a ghetto. There I met my wife, Susan. In April of '42, they took us to camp, the slave camp, also Wehrmacht, which we worked in the fields from sun to sun. We were sleeping on the floor. In barracks on the floor, we were sleeping. And then as they decided to kill all the Jewish in Tovste, we escaped from the camp at the time. And then we came back to camp.

How did you escape, Mr. Schmelzer?

We could escape. It wasn't chained or fenced. So when they started shooting the Jews in Tovste, we heard. It wasn't too far away. It was about 2 kilometer. So as we heard the shootings, we ran out from the barracks, where we could escape into the fields.

What year was this?

'42.

This was in April, May of '42. And we were there in [PLACE NAME]. And then the second time they started killing the Jews, this was on a Thursday. And then in a couple of weeks later they came on a Sunday. And they started the same thing. At that time, I escaped from the camp. In the camp, one of my brothers were in the camp with me. And three months before liberation, they killed him.

And after the summer, when we finished the work, they got together all the people, the young people from the camp, and they dug a grave and they killed them all. Luckily I escaped from there. And we also had a girl friend-- it was another friend's girlfriend. When they killed him, she went with me and my wife-- I was not married yet. But we went all three together.

We went to one of the farmers. He kept us for two nights. And then he threw us out. He said that the Germans have to come to him. So we went out from there. And we went to another farmer. He kept us for two weeks and he chased us

out. At that time--

These were Gentile farmers?

Gentile farmers, yes. But before we came to this-- this was during the occupation from the Germans, we escaped from the camp. And we were living in the woods, in the fields. We didn't sleep two nights in one place. We went every night in another place. And whatever we could get to eat from some people, Gentile people, some of them gave us food. And this was the way we survived. And then from there-- I went too far out there.

That's fine. Go back. You can go back, Mr. Schmelzer.

What?

Go back if you wish.

Yeah, before we came to the camp, I escaped at least about 25 times. When they start killing Jews, I escaped from the ghetto. And I went in one time in an attic, one time into the woods. And that time they killed all my family, and I remained the only one. And from there, I came to Tovste, where I said before. And in Tovste I met my wife, which I told you this. And this was going on the whole occupation from the Germans.

And from there, when they killed my brother and my girl friend's friend, we went to this farmer. And after this, we didn't have anywhere to go. December the 10th was a big snow storm. And they threw us out. They chased us out from the attic. One of the farmers chased us out from the attic because he got different Jews. The other Jews gave him more money, so he could keep them. And we went to one of the farmers.

He was the only one on the field near a forest. We came there. We knocked on the door. And they opened up the door, and they let us in. When he let us in, he asked, who are you? So my girl friend said she was from the nearest village, where she was living. And I said from where I am. And he knew more or less where my home was. And he let us in there. And we stayed there 3 and 1/2 months.

Were you working for them?

I was not working for him. But he kept us for pity. And he was the only one on the field there. And after this-- we were there. And one of the last nights, we were outside, and we thought that the Russians-- we saw some soldiers are going. . And we thought that this is already the Russians. So we went into the house. And when we came into the house, the Germans came into the door. This was still Germans.

They came into the door. And they knocked on the door, [GERMAN]. And we opened up-- the owner, the farmer opened up the house. They had a wounded soldier. And they brought him in. And they laid him down. And he asked for a towel, in German, for a [GERMAN]. I made believe I don't understand, I don't know nothing. And the old man, the farmer, gave him a towel. So he took-- he saw that he understands a little bit.

He took him to bring him over the [Non-English], the water. That he should bring them down to a farmer, he should bring them over the water. And then he brought them there. The farmer wasn't home, so he brought them to another one. And then he left them there. He said, I'm going to look for him. And he came home. And the next day, the Russians came in. The Russian army came in. And we got mostly like liberated.

And then when the Russians came in, they came from them, they went into Tovste, to the place where we were in camp. And we met more Jewish boys and girls, which they were together with us in camp. This was the only place-- the first place where the Russians saw Jews. And we got together. Everybody was going into one house. We were afraid to go to different houses. Some of the houses were empty because they killed the Jews and they took them out from there.

And from there, we went back to one of the farmers where my girl friend had stuff, gave them away to hide. And we took back the stuff. And as we came back to Tovste, the Germans were back in. And we came into one of the farmers.

And she asked me, where are you going to go? She says to me, the Germans are there. I said, I want to go someplace. She says, don't go no place. You just tell them you are my brother and they are two sisters, my girl friend and my wife are two sisters.

And we stayed there with them 12 days. We slept with the Germans on the floor. They didn't know we are Jews, Jewish. And we slept with them. And then when the Russians came closer, we escaped. And that time we decide to go to Chernivtsi. This was occupied from the Russians, but it was Romania. And we were in Romania. In Chernivtsi, we were there for almost a year. I worked for the Russians.

Where did you live in Chernivtsi?

In Chernivtsi, we took an empty house. And we live with another two families because we always were afraid to go ourselves into a house, so then we live with people. So we were there with two friends. We were living together.

What kind of work did you do for the Russians?

For the Russians I said I am a mechanic. So they gave me mechanic work. Whatever I could, I did for them.

And your wife and girl friend?

My girl friend was already not with me. She went with somebody else. And my wife was with me. And I lived with another friend which we met there. I lived with him.

And what did your wife-to-be do?

My wife was home. I got her a piece of paper from the Russians, that she is my wife and that I'm working, she didn't supposed to work. And we did some business there, black marketing to survive the time. And at the time when it came out a law that the Polish citizens can go to Poland, so we registered. And then a time later, we went to Poland. They put us into cars, cattle cars, the Russians.

And they brought us up to Poland. And we came to Poland. I lived in Poland for three months. And then we went to Germany. And they put us into a train. And we went to Germany. And on the Czech border they called us. And they opened up the cars. And they took us out.

This was after the war was over?

This was after liberation. And then they took us in Czechoslovakia, in Morovska Ostrava. And they took us in to one room, 500 people. Everybody, whoever got a table, slept on the table. Whoever had three chairs, slept on three chairs. If not, you slept on the floor. And a policemen used to sit at the door, and watching us that we shouldn't be able to go out from there.

They gave us bread and soup for a while. And then they decided they couldn't keep us there. They took us out from there. And they brought us to barracks, which was [PLACE NAME]. And we were there also for a few months in the barracks, living also in one room. We were living there, maybe about 15, 20 people.

Who was in charge there?

In charge were the Czechs, the Czechs. You know, it was meant that they are from the UNRRA. And they gave us some food because the UNRRA paid for this. That time the UNRRA paid for it. And they gave us coupons that we used. And they sent out people to get the food in one place. And we had the kitchens, one kitchen for everybody in one barrack. And there we were living for a couple of months.

And then we went from there to Germany. We went to the border. In the nighttime, we crossed the border from Czechoslovakia to Germany, and then we came to Germany. And this was in Munich. And from there they distributed

everybody to different DP camps. They put me to a camp. It was named Pocking. In the barracks-- I don't know what they had in these barracks.

But we were in the barracks. And we also had two, three families in one room because they didn't have so much room. And I was there. And my wife got pregnant. And from there, I was transferred to Windsheim. Windsheim was a better camp, which they allowed to have pregnant women, women with children, with small children they allowed.

Was Windsheim under the direction of UNRRA also?

This was under direction of UNRRA. This was under direction of UNRRA. And they allowed me to come there. I had a friend there, which was in camp already. And they wrote me that we can come there. So this is why we came there, because my wife was pregnant. And I was there until-- about three years.

My son was born and there, in the DP camp in 1946. And then we lived there another 2 and 1/2 years. In May '49, we came to the United States. When we came to the United States, we also didn't have anywhere to live. My wife had an aunt. She gave us a room.

Where was she located?

In the Bronx. She was in the Bronx. She gave us a room. And we were living there for a few months. Then later the family helped us out and I got an apartment in the Bronx. And I started working. I looked for a job and I started working. And I got a butcher job. To be a butcher, I made \$25 a week.

This was 1949?

'49. I got \$25 a week. And then I got a different butcher job. I made \$35 a week, which I worked a year's time there. There I became a union member. And I went to different jobs. And I worked myself up a little bit. And I bought my own store.

A butcher shop?

A butcher shop.

In the Bronx?

I had a butcher shop in the East Bronx. And from the butcher shop, I had some friends which they were in the building line. And I came into the building line at the end of 1969. And I am since-- and I moved into Elizabeth in 1970. And I lived in Elizabeth since 1970.

Pardon me. Can we go back?

Yes.

When you were growing up. Was your family from-- were you Orthodox? Were you very religious?

In Europe, every Jew was like here, Orthodox. My father was going every day, davening. My father was wearing a [INAUDIBLE], a black [INAUDIBLE] with a gartel. They would go into shul every day. In Shabbos, we were going to shul. All of us did shul wherever they belonged. And we had a kosher home. I had a kosher home. My mother was helping out in the store because we had a big, big business. And my mother helped out in the store.

So she helped out in the store and also did the cooking?

And also took care of the children.

The children, my.

She took care of the children and one of her sisters, who lived with us. My mother died in 1933. And my father died after I came home from-- he died in 1940.

I see.

When I came home from war.

Do you remember-- you were in the Polish army from '37 to '39.

Yes.

Do you remember when you were first aware, as a Polish Jew, that there was terrible danger coming?

When I was in the army, I was told from my officers, I'm a Jew.

So there was antisemitism in the Polish army.

There was antisemitism in the Polish army, and because the main-- what shall I say? The main boss from our army said-- they put me in for an advance, to advance me. So he said, so long he is the boss from this division, a Jew will not advance. Antisemitism was big that time. And I had friends which were living in different towns in Poland. They used to get letters that at the outskirts of the town, they knocked out-- at the shoemaker they knocked out the windows. The Poles were also cutting beards, the beards from the Jews.

This was before 1937?

This was before. This was before '38. This was already before the war between Germany and Poland.

Before the war, did you hear of things that were going on in Germany?

No, no, you see, we didn't know what was going on in Germany because we were in Poland and everybody was living there and thought that this is the best. But I heard from Germany-- after liberation, I met a German. And he told me a nice story of how it came, how it came to kill the Jews. Hitler took his mind because of the Jews, the Germans are suffering.

As a child in school, when you went to the Polish schools, did you have any antisemitism there in the school?

In school, not so much. In school, not so much. But out of school, sometimes you met-- with Ukraine boys or whatever. They always used to say, Jew, Jew, Jew. Antisemitism already started from 1937, '38. But I wasn't home. See, I was in the army from 1937 until I had to come home in 1939, which I went into the war.

Did everybody have to go to army service?

Yes.

Every young man?

Yes, every young man was [Both talking].

Jew or Gentile.

Jew or Gentile had to go to the Polish army for two years.

And then when the war started, then they sent you home, is that it?

When the war started with Germany--

With Germany.

--I went into the German war, Poland and Germany. I went into the war.

And you were captured and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp.

And I was captured in the Warsaw and I became a war prisoner. And I was in war prison for a while. Then I found out how they're letting out people. And I lied to them. I told them I'm a German. My name is a German name. And I told them my father was a German. You know, it's called the Volksdeutsche, not a full German, and whoever was born in Germany, under occupation of Germany. So they let us out. And I organized there. And we went out, 25 people. We came out, six Jews.

One didn't know from each other that we are Jews. And as we were going home, we were walking-- they didn't have no train anymore. So we walked from 6:00 to 6:00. And whenever we came into a village or a town, we stopped and we went into a house. And we said we want to sleep over. The Gentile people, they let us in. They put some straw on the floor and we slept over. They gave us something to eat.

They didn't know you were Jews?

No.

No, OK.

They were Poles too. I was Jewish. But they were Poles.

Right.

And I had a friend from my place where I was in the army. He knew that I am a Jew. He even came when we were in prison. He said to me, why should you give yourself out as a Jew? Because from the Jews, they took off the coats, and they made them to dig the toilets. So he says, if it's going to be better, you will say you are a Jew, otherwise why should you give yourself out and you should go to this work? Instead, he says to me, your name is Paul, your name is going to be Pavo, a Polish name, but it is similar to my name.

And we were there. And then they put us in-- as I found out how to go out, what to lie to them, they let us out. And we were going home. And as we came to a train station, that we heard already the train, there I met a girl friend from my hometown and another woman. And they start kissing me and hugging me. So the Polish guy who was staying there, and he was blessing himself. I said, what are you doing? He says, if you could do a thing like that, you're deserving it.

I don't understand. What did he mean?

If I could arrange myself, not showing that I was a Jew--

I see. Oh, he knew from the women that you were Jewish.

Yes, so he said to me, if you could do a thing like-- in Polish-- if you could do a thing like that, you deserve it.

You were smart enough to find a way. Go ahead.

And then the war also, when we were in the woods, I met a couple of Jewish boys, they remind ourselves that this is Rosh ha-Shanah and just Friday Erev Yom Kippur was September 20th. I got called that time into prison. And they

walked us-- they caught, at that time, 40,000 people, 40,000 soldiers. And they walked us in the fields. And Friday night they stopped. When it came in the evening, we stopped. Wherever you walked there, you stopped. And I remind myself it's Yom Kippur. So I fasted.

Otherwise what were you eating?

What we were eating when they walked us, well, whatever you could get, a raw potato, a raw beet, an onion, whatever you could get on the field. They didn't give us to to eat.

They gave you nothing to eat?

No, the days when we marched, they didn't give us nothing to eat.

When you marched, how many were you marching?

They marched us for two days. They marched us. And they brought us in to a stadium. And they let us in on an open stadium, which the stadium was a soccer stadium. It was fenced all around. And they let us in there. And when we were there, it was raining. So you bend down your head.

Was this winter? Was it very cold?

No, this was September.

Oh.

This was towards the end of September.

Had you been able to communicate with your family at all while you were--

No, I was too far away. I didn't know-- if somebody is alive, I didn't know. I just knew that Russia-- I didn't know if Russia came by. I heard that Russia split Poland with Germany. They took a part of Poland, and they took a part of Poland.

This was during the pact between Stalin and Hitler.

Stalin and Hitler.

While you were in the prison, did you hear anything more about what was happening to the Jews regarding the concentration camps?

When I was in prison, I stood near the fence. And a German was on the other side. He started talking to me in German. And he says to me, now we have Poland-- we want Poland. Now, he says, we're going to take ourselves to the Jews. So I says to him, I don't understand what you're saying. I understood every word, but I didn't understand. I said to him, I don't understand what you're saying.

You know, but also going back, being in camp with my wife, when they escape from camp, when they start shooting in the city-- you know, like I said before, we started running from the barracks. This was in the nighttime. We had like Jewish police watching us.

The kapos you mean?

Kapos.

Yeah.

Kapos were watching us. For them, we weren't so afraid. So we grabbed each other. I grabbed my wife, you know, and we ran out to the fields. And in the fields, we ran into the woods. Everybody was running wherever he could. And sometimes you met with different people in the field. Also, in camp-- when I was in camp, I got a gun. I bought three guns for me, for my brother, for my friend.

A Ukrainian came over and asked for my name. So I says, [INAUDIBLE]. He says to me, I need them. I says, what would be if I would be [PERSONAL NAME]]. You know, my name, what he called me. He says to me, I got a gun. I says, how do you know I want to have a gun? He says, I know. So he wanted \$20, just American money. So I had some money in a little bottle. And I had this money dug in under a tree. You know, I couldn't keep it with me, so I dug it in there under a tree.

And whenever I need something, I went there, and I sat down, make believe I do something. I sat down and I dug it out. I took it out and I went to another tree. And I buried it in another place. And I gave it to him. And then in a while, he says to me-- he came, and he says, I got another gun. I says, where is the gun? He says, in the field. I said to him, you know, the first gun you brought with you, the second you put in the field.

He says to me, I put it in the field. I says, look, you know, my life is worth nothing and you want to live. You go in front of me. And if anybody's waiting for me there, I says, you are killed first and then they will kill me. And sure enough, I came there. I got the other gun, and for my friend a gun. And then he wanted to give me for 100 people-- for 100 people, he wanted to give me ammunition and everything.

Have you any idea where he got the guns?

I asked him. I asked him. When the Russians escaped, they threw everything off. They throw away everything. And he was working in the church. He was working in the church. He was helping out the priest. He took all these things and he put them into the church. Because when he brought me the gun, I ask him how you got these things. And he says, I'm going to make you bullets.

I asked him, how you going to make me bullets? He says, when he was in the Polish army, he told me what he was. And I knew already if he was working in this place, he knew how to make bullets. He knew how to put together rifles. You know, and then I went away to another camp. And I went to the Jewish boys. And I said to the boys, I got somebody that he wants to give me ammunition.

He wants to give me rifles, guns, everything. Everyone said before, I want it, I'm going to go, we're going to go. I figured we're going to have some people that should be able to go to the partisans. And we never could-- and they didn't-- nobody got ready to buy a gun or get a gun. So when we got the guns, we tried to get together with the partisans. And we never could get together with them.

Why? What happened?

It was too far away. It was too far away for us, you know, we should get in contact with them.

While you were in the army, and then the prison camp, and the slave labor camp, you said one of your brothers was killed just after the liberation or--

Yes, right before the liberation.

What happened to the rest of your brothers and sisters?

My brothers and sisters got killed in my hometown.

In the ghetto in your hometown?



In the ghetto in my hometown. And then the rest of them, they took together-- whoever survived, they took together, they brought them to Belzec. One of my sisters-- this is what I was told. My sister jumped the train. But she didn't survive. Because I went-- about four years ago, we went back to Poland and we went back to Russia.

We went to the graves where they killed my wife's parents and my brother and friend is killed there. So they went to the graves, to my wife's hometown. And the Russians were there. They let us go. They went with us. They let us go. And they didn't say nothing. We came there. We said Kaddish. We light candles. We lit candles also there. And they did not say nothing.

When was this? Last year?

This is already about four years. We planned to go this year again, but somehow we didn't.

Where exactly did you meet your wife?

My wife, I met in Tovste, in the ghetto.

In the ghetto. You had not known her before?

No, she is from [PLACE NAME]. And I am from a different town, from Gwozdziec. But when I was in ghetto, I was alone. I didn't had nobody. So a girl says to me one day, let's go. Let's go there to a girl friend, which I knew her from before the war. She was from Gorodenka, from another town. She says, you know, girls come together there. So I says, all right, let's go. So we went through the fields.

Now, How old were you?

I was-- this was already in '41. I was-- 16 to '41-- about 26, 27 years old. You know, so we went through the fields. And they came in this girl friend's house. And my wife was there, sitting on the bed. I sat down next to her. And we're sitting, thank God, until now, 45 years.

That's a lovely time to sit.

And after liberation, when we came to Chernivtsi, I went in, like here in court. And we took out papers that we're married. And we decide to go to a rabbi. January 15, we went to a rabbi. And I said to the rabbi, I want to marry [INAUDIBLE], a Jewish wedding.

So he says, come over in the evening, I will have here a minyan. And he will have a chuppah. So I took my wife. She was wearing a [INAUDIBLE]. I wore a [INAUDIBLE]. And we came there. He had a minyan. And he gave us [INAUDIBLE]. And we got married, Jewish traditional marriage. [INAUDIBLE].

You had mentioned earlier that you had wanted to go to Israel.

Yes, after liberation. See, I wanted to go to Israel all my years. You know, and then when they took me in the army, it was already too late. The war broke out. And when we came to Germany, I wanted to go to Israel. I wanted to go to Israel. But my wife has a brother. And her brother was here.

And her family, her mother's sister, her mother's brother, and the mother's uncle was here. So she wanted to go here. I says, look, I want to go-- she says to me, you know, she has the brother here and the whole family is here. So I decided to come to America. They sent us an affidavit at that time, what was needed. And we came to the United States.

And you haven't regretted it, I'm sure.

I don't regret. I have no regrets. It's one country-- the country where we're living, it's the best country in the world. I know countries, you know. I knew Poland. I know the Russian system because I worked for them a year and a half. I

know the system, their system. And I know already, I'm long enough here. And thank God, I'm not sorry.

What did you tell your children about your experiences?

My children know everything.

Were they interested?

Yes.

Did you talk to them when they were small?

We would talk to them when they were smaller. And we told them what we went through, how we survived, you know. We told them everything. And then they watched Exodus. And they saw, on Exodus, a boy and a girl is running, running away. When they were watching, they said, there's Mommy and Daddy.

His name was Dov, wasn't it?

Yeah. You know, it was hard. You know, the [INAUDIBLE] for life was so strong, they were walking in the nights, in the rain. You didn't have what to put on. When we escaped from the camp, we went in for hiding in bushes. And it started raining. It started raining during the morning, a whole day and a whole night. We were laying on the ground. The water came under. And we were laying and the raining on top. We were wet, complete wet.

It was a struggle to survive. I was thinking the day we get liberated, they're going to frame us. You know, we got liberated. But the Russians didn't frame nobody. The Russians didn't know. Because when they weren't listed, the first -- right after liberation, they came out to town, to the city. So they were the Russian officers. And one of them heard we're talking Jewish.

He walked after us because we all were living in one house. So he walked after us. And he asked, how did you survive? You know, we told him, we were in camp, and this is the way we survived. It was a Wehrmacht camp. We worked from sun to sun. We had Ukrainian watchmen We had all kinds. And there was a German, which he wasn't-- he was a German, but he wasn't too bad. He wasn't too bad, you know. And he came into the house. We told him we're Jewish.

He walked out to the other officers, to the mayor. And he says to the mayor, you know, Jews are here. So he says, they must have worked with the Germans. They couldn't believe that the Germans left over some Jews, you know. So he said, they must have worked with the Germans. This is why they remain alive. And then they found out, the further they were going, they found more Jews in more camps. So they saw already that some Jews survived.

Why do you think some of you survived?

Why?

Yes.

How did you get the strength?

I had brothers. They were smart, maybe smarter than I am. And they didn't. When I was in my hometown-- this is a coincidence-- and the Germans and the Ukrainians chained us around in this little ghetto, I was in a house without a ladder, without nothing. I jumped up in the attic. My mind said, you lived through the war. Just like that. I wasn't even thinking of living or what. Just I was thinking of escaping.

My mind said to me, you lived through the war. It was-- I don't know if it was smartness. It was lucky. Just luck. Just pure luck. You know, because I was walking around, I had my wife and I had my girl friend. She lives in Brooklyn now. I used to walk with them at night. They were by a farmer in an attic. And I went to another farmer. I gave him a gun.

And he used to give me food anytime I came.

He couldn't keep us. He couldn't hide us because he had too many people working. So he said to me, I will give you anything you want, but I cannot keep you. So I used to go with my girl friend. We used to go to him. I was in a strange vicinity. She knew where it was. I used to go with her. We were never thinking-- we left my wife, you know. We left her in the attic herself.

If anything happens to us-- all right, I had a gun with me. But if we have more than one, I can get killed. And the same thing, I can kill him, he can kill me, and that's it. We never were thinking how stupid we were. We were never thinking, what will happen to this girl in the attic if they will not come back.

How did you get the gun?

I just told you, from a farmer, a farmer which worked-- he was in the Polish army also. And he worked in a church. He helped out the priest.

He was Polish or Ukrainian?

Ukrainian.

Ukrainian.

Ukraine. He did it for money because he didn't do it for good faith. He did it for money because he knew maybe-- he figured I'll give him some money. And this was the survival.

You got the money by trading in the black pocket, is that it?

No, at that time I still had some money hiding from home. In a little bottle, I had some money hiding. And I gave him. And then we didn't have no money already. You know, and we tried to live whatever we could. There were some Ukrainian people-- I don't know if they were afraid. They knew I got a gun. They used to give us-- they used to come in the morning to work. They worked on one side of the fields, and we worked on another side of the fields. They used to bring a pot of potatoes. And somehow I got it over. I used to give it the girls to eat.

So you did farming work.

Yes, farming work.

And you also worked as a mechanic for the Russians.

As a mechanic for the Russians, I worked. And for the Germans, we did farming work in the fields we worked. Anything they needed, they got free labor. They got free labor. They got the Jews.

And they didn't pay you, of course. And they didn't feed you.

They didn't give no food either. They gave a little soup.. A little soup they gave every day. They didn't give you no food. And then when we escaped, I didn't need their food. You know, we used to go to farmers. And some of the farmers used to give me food, bread, different things, you know.

You were extremely lucky that you weren't sent to a concentration camp. Did you know many people who were sent to concentration camps?

Yes, yeah, you see, there was a camp when my-- how it happened, my brother came to Tovste to me when he was-- he remained when then they took me the first time, when they cleaned out the Jews from my hometown. And they brought me to Kolomyia. From Kolomyia, I went to the camp, the Wehrmacht camp. So he remained in Kolomyia. He hid out

there for a lot of times. And then he found out where I am. He wrote me a postcard that he's going to come.

And he paid to a Pole. He paid them money. And he brought them over to Tovste. And he was with me for a while, for a couple of months. And then he came to the same camp where we were. And he was there with me. And then we were out of the camp. We were going to a farmer. We had a farmer-- we used to sit by the farmer. We used to hide by them. They were Ukrainians. For this farmer I used to work. For this farmer I used to work.

When I escaped, I used to come in to him. I used to work for him, helping in the fields and everything. He used to give me food. And they gave us food. And my brother was going to another camp. And the Germans killed him. What happened, there was a Ukrainian organization, which they called themselves Banderas. So they came to call him. He should go to-- like, into the army. He refused.

This was on a Saturday night. They killed him in his house. So then they said that the Poles did it. Then the Poles said that we have partisans here, we have Jewish partisans here. And he didn't want to listen to me. He went out. Yes, they killed him in September. It shook us.

Did you ever hear of anything happening to those farmers who were helpful to you?

This farmer, that he kept us 3 and 1/2 months, they killed him.

Who did?

The Ukrainian Banderas as they call themselves. It's an organization like this. First they worked against Hitler. Then they worked against the Jews. They couldn't do nothing because they didn't have the Jews. So they found out that this farmer kept Jews, so they killed him.

Have you ever seen any of the goyim who helped you?

No, no.

None of them. Do you think any of them survived?

They may have survived. But it's too hard to communicate with them, to go there. When I was there three years ago, we had limited time. And I don't think they are alive. They weren't so young.

Did the Polish priests, or the clergy, help the Jews at all?

Not that I know. You see, some of them-- I have a friend, a Polish farmer. He escaped from the camp with his brother, [PERSONAL NAME]. He escaped from the camp. And he went to this farmer. And he knew him. Then the farmer knew them. They knew his parents and everything. And he kept him. He hide him for all the way over the war. He pays him off for it. One of them died already.

But you know, he is thankful to them. And he pays them off. He knows whatever they need. And there were people which they helped a little bit. But of you would say, I never asked them. For instance, we came in, three of us, to this farmer. And they opened up 7 o'clock in the morning in December, December 10th. They opened up the door and they let us in. And they gave us one bed. They were sleeping on the oven there, you know.

And they gave us one bed. And I slept with the two girls in one bed. And I start talking, and she says, God will help. I want to tell her why we came there. She says, God will help you. And we were there for 3 and 1/2 months. And I had the gun. And I sold the gun. I need money and I didn't have it. Because he had to pay like taxes he had to pay. He didn't have no money. And she used to drink.

This was the farmer and his wife?

Yeah, she used to go to another farmer and buy vodka. And the other farmer found out she's buying every day vodka. She knew already who was there. They knew that I am there with the two girls. And the other farmer couldn't do nothing because he had a Jewish boy. He hide out a Jewish boy there. And they were there. And sometimes even they were by this farmer.

What you say to antisemitism, when she got mad, she starts singing, the Jews betrayed Jesus. So it was in her. It was in her. Even she knew we were Jewish and everything, she said the Jews betrayed Jesus. And I gave away the gun and I didn't say nothing to them. That means like I betrayed them. You know, it was very, very hard to live through all these things, to go through two, three years. It was very hard. And thank God for this.

Do you think about it often now?

I do. When we get together in a gathering, or any no, a simchas what they're finishing is our living through. Everybody has a different story of his life. I can never forget this. We can never forget. The living through the 3 and 1/2 months we're also lucky. The Polish woman fell in love with me. This was the luckiest thing that she kept us.

She what? She fell in love with you?

She fell in love with me.

So what happened?

Nothing, nothing.

You were there with your wife.

They were there. She was with my wife, you know. I had two girls. But we were sleeping in one room. And I ask her, she says God will help. You know, God will help. So God helped me live through have another way.

Her husband-- she had a husband too?

It wasn't a real husband, you know. The goy had a wife and five children. He threw her out from the house. And she was running with the Russians, you know. She was a Polish officer's wife. And she came there. So he took her in. Like he took us in, he took her in. And he was living with her there. Any other questions?

Any other questions? Are there are many people in the Elizabeth area who came from a similar part of Poland as you?

No, no, there aren't. Different parts of Poland.

So you befriended-- you got friendly with [PERSONAL NAME]] and-- well, here.

You know, I'm friendly with [INAUDIBLE] and some partners with the real estate.

Yes, but you know them [Both talking].

They come in on the same gatherings. And we go to Rabbi Tiser's shul. You know, we met each other and we became friendly. We are friends.

Have you gone back to Poland?

I was in Poland once, when I went to Russia. So we went to Poland. From Poland we went to Russia. When I was in Poland, we went all over all the concentration camps. We were in Dachau-- not in Dachau. We were in Auschwitz.

Did you get back to your hometown?

No. I was in my wife's hometown. I was in the town that I was in camp, where the camp was. In this town I was. Because my hometown is a little out of the way. We couldn't go there. And I wouldn't go there because I haven't got a home to go. Here we went because it was on the way to the [PLACE NAME]. We were there. And we went to Tovste, where we were in camp, where they killed my brother, they killed my friend, and my wife's parents are there, parents and a sister.

Excuse me, Mr. Schmelzer, we're going to have to take a break now.

OK.

So far you've told us some very interesting things.

No, I mixed in because--

That's all right. That's fine.

There's more to say, you know. Go.

Mr. Schmelzer, we were going to ask you about when you were a young boy in your hometown. Were there any Zionist groups?

There were a lot. In my hometown were a lot of Zionists. I belonged to a Zionist organization. And like I said before, I always wanted to go to Israel. And if not for the war with Poland and Germany, I may well have been in Israel. You know, the youth had where to go and the youth had what to do. They never knew what drugs is, or smoking whatsoever, like in this United States.

And did some of the young men and women in your town go to Palestine?

They went to Israel. They went to Palestine.

They stayed there?

They went to Palestine. They stayed till today in the kibbutz, in the kibbutz. Kibbutz [PLACE NAME], which when I go to Israel, I always visit them in Israel, and go to the kibbutz.

Well, Mr. Schmelzer, this has been a very revealing, very valuable interview. Thank you very, very much for sharing it with us.

Thank you.

OK.

[MUSIC PLAYING]