

Good afternoon. I'm Bernard Weinstein, director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project of the Holocaust Resource Center. Today we welcome Eva Laks. Mrs. Laks.

Yes, how are you? I would like to mention that I'm making the tape for my children, that they should never forget to remember what I went through, The Holocaust.

Thank you. Can you tell us a little bit about the place where you grew up and what your life was like before the war?

Well, I was born in Ryki and when I was three years old--

Ryki is in--

Ryki is in Poland.

Near?

Near Garwolin, one side is DÄ™blin, it's 23 kilometer from DÄ™blin and not far from Garwolin. That was the voivdeship that is the state of--

Was it near Warsaw?

Near Warsaw, not far. And I was 3 years old. There was a fire, and the whole town went down. It was burned. So my father moved to another town, which the name is Jankowiec. That was called Jankowiec nad Wisla, is local, Vistula.

So I didn't have much of a growing up in Ryki, where I was born. I did all my growing up in Jankowiec. My father was there a shochet. It's a small town and he worked hard to support ourself, it wasn't a big town.

How many people in your family?

My family was nine. Seven children alive and two parent. And we lived there, we went to school, and the boys, they didn't go to school, they went to cheder. We were very religious. And 'til the 1939 the war break out, and it was very hard to make a living for a shochet because it was forbidden to slaughter.

Going back a little bit before the war, what kind of an education did you have?

I went to public school, because there wasn't the Yiddish school, but summertime I always went on vacation to my grandparents, which lived in Ryki. And I went there to Bais Yaakov The two months of vacation. I went there in Bais Yaakov Then afterwards, it was my aunt, my mother's sister, came to Jankowiec, and she organized Bais Yaakov there. And we all went there and Bais Yaakov.

But being 'twas a small town that didn't exist long, so I had six grades of public school. And I had to stop school because my mother got ill of a kidney illness, and it was small children around. I was the oldest in the house. I had to take care of my mother and of the children. And I had to cook, and nurse my mother, because she was in bed, and she had the nursing baby, that I had to-- being the oldest so I had a handful. And my mother got better and we were hardly make a living, but they managed well with the help of the grandparents.

Your mother's parents or your father's parents?

Both.

They were still living at that time.

They were very young yet.

I see.

They weren't as old as I am now when they got killed.

What was life like in Jankowiec for Jews? What did you experience? Antisemitism? Was it difficult?

It was antisemitism, because when I went to school before with the Gentiles together, boys and girls together, so they always said [NON-ENGLISH] that we should go to Palestine. We really shouldn't be here.

Who said this, the other children or the adults?

The other children, the boys. And that we are rich, that we take away everything from them. And we were afraid for them. When it came a holiday, nobody came out on the street, walking, because by the holiday, they got drunk, and each time was killing.

Were there pogroms, or were there any kinds of--

Not in our town, but they were in Poland, were pogroms. And it was antisemitism they felt, but we were careful not to go with them, not to--

Do you have memories of ever being personally threatened or personally attacked?

No, because you see, in a religious home, girls they kept, they didn't let go out at night. And we didn't mix too much with other people, what should be threatening.

Did you have a large extended family-- aunts, uncles, cousins, living in--

Nothing in Jankowiec. They all were in Ryki and other towns. And my mother had four other siblings. There were five children. And my father had-- there were five brothers. His father didn't live there. He died when he became a khosen. You know what it means, a groom.

That up just got married, yeah. Did you see your family, your extended family, often?

We saw them every vacation, and every vacation we all went there to Ryki. And we stayed there for two months. And my mother had a brother in Warsaw. So we went, when they took out my tonsils, we went there, and we stayed there for a month. But we didn't have money to travel around to visit family in other towns. We only went to the grandparents, mostly. And almost everybody from the family, from the closer family, they lived in Ryki.

When the war broke out were you in Jankowiec?

Yes.

What are your memories of the beginning of the war?

It was, I remember, airplanes flew by and then bombard across the Vistula. There was Kazimierz a town Kazimierz that was from the historic Kazimierz Wielki. So there was a bombard the town, so it was so the airplanes flying by. We were hiding. You know we were playing outside near the house, we were hiding. You were afraid. Then when the Germans came in, in the beginning, -- after.

And then Poland lost the war. A Germans came in to every town, you know, and they came in and first thing what they did is burn the shul. We had a very old shul. They burned it, and they looked for the men to come to pour water on it, too. And then they let them climb on the ladder, and with the pails of water, they threw them down in the fire. They pushed away the ladder, that they should fall.

They came to look for my father. It was a Polish man, what he came with a German, with SS, and he came in, Jude here, Jude here. So as they came in, my father was behind the door, so they didn't see him. They came into the house, where is the Jude? So we said, he is not here. So they left, then my father was saved then. He didn't have to go to the shul to carry water.

One time he went to take a haircut, and he came back all with a kerchief because a German came in to the barber, and he shaved off a piece of-- he hurt him-- he shaved off the beard, he had a beard, and with the flesh on him. So it was hurting him, and he was so ashamed. All his life he had the beard. He came home, he looked terrible, besides, he was hurt, with the kerchief all around.

And then started, they send to work, you know, they had to cut the the-- go on the field, and to cut straw, whatever there. So I went to work. I went to work there where for us that they're at each day, every everybody had to give a day. So I went for us, then I went to make money for somebody else, because during the war we didn't have enough to feed the children.

We bought the one kilogram of bread for nine people. So me and my father my mother, we refused to take bread, it should be for the smaller children. It was very bad. Then we moved in to-- we lived in an apartment, and they moved in to the shul, in back, in the back of the shul was a room, so we moved in because we didn't have for rent to pay, and moved in there. And we slaughtered chicken, and my father slaughter chickens so we had a little bit 'til one day we all broke out in typhoid. All the children were sick. That was in 1940.

Was there an epidemic?

It was an epidemic of typhoid. We all were sick. And we had the doctor. It's not a doctor, it's like a man nurse. You can call it a felcher they called it, man nurse.

Were you not permitted to have doctors, was that the rule?

It was-- no. The old doctor died, and he left a son, and he came to make visits. And he knew about a little bit, so he gave us medicine, he cured us. And afterward in 1941, we all continued to work. And one time my father didn't-- the I don't know what happened then, that he couldn't go to work, so they put him in jail. And it was a very bad thing for a man like this to put in jail. He was overnight in jail and came out. Then it was after that day, we heard that they are evacuating PuÅ,awy It was near Jankowies. It was on the other side, 12 kilometer from us, they were evacuated, all the Jews. And then Kazimierz was evacuated. So we thought being that our town is a little town, they would forget on us. But they didn't. After they finished with Kazimierz they evacuated us to ZwoleÅ,,. The whole town.

Did you know at that time what evacuation meant?

No because when we came to ZwoleÅ,, my father he said, children [NON-ENGLISH], that means a change of place, maybe it will be lucky. That means that we didn't know what's going to happen. And being there over Shabbos, we came in Friday. The evacuation took place on Friday, and we were there over Shabbos.

Tuesday, they took us on a marketplace, on a middle of the town. They took every Jew, but this and this age, children over 15 and elder. So they-- me and my father and my mother went to that place, and the children were at home. My mother was a sickly woman, she had varicose veins and she was-- so I was like a second mother to the children,

So my youngest brother, [? Bura ?] said, Havila, where are you going? I want to go with you. I said, you stay here, and I'm coming right back. I'm going with my mother and you stay here with the others, and I'm coming right back. I never saw him in my life anymore. I never saw him. Of course I was taken away to concentration camp, and my father was taken away, and my mother went home to the children.

We were staying on the-- under open space all night. In the morning came trucks, and they took us on the trucks. But while we were going by, the people were going up, when the truck was on one side The SS men on the other side, with

these sticks and they beat us. Everybody who went up on the truck were beaten.

So at this point it was just you and your father. Nobody else in the family.

No, because my next brother was 11 years old, so he was too young to be taken to a camp.

And did you see your mother again?

No I never saw them. That Was the last time I saw my family. As we were going up, and were beaten up, but we were sitting on the bus took a few hours till they took us to-- we didn't know where we're going. When we came to Skarzysko they told us that this will be the place where we will stay. We will work. We have to make use of our time.

So we went in to-- it was then, one big house. A barrack. One big barrack which men were in one side and women were on the other side. And my father went to another place, another camp. I didn't hear nothing from him.

You know the name of the camp where he went?

I think it was Chelmno. I don't remember exactly. And my father, he couldn't stay there because he didn't eat the trayf He ate only kosher. But in the camp you couldn't, so he didn't eat at all till he-- when he left the camp. He left the camp to a village, where he was slaughtering before the war. A small village by Jankowiec and he took, my brother after me, he took with him to stay with him, and my mother stayed there with five children. The youngest.

I was working in a factory, and from ammunition. I made the pistols, the little bullets for pistols. The name of the camp was Hasag. And we were working there with Gentile people what came in from the town Skarzysko And the little boys, you know, like 16 years old, they were our bosses. They're managers. They manage with us. The German, they had the big help from the Poles, to beat us, to do-- if I broke a needle in the machine, he slapped me, he hit me, and you couldn't say nothing, because otherwise he was hit you more, or go to the SS and say that, I'm doing this especially.

So I was working with the woman what came in from Skarzysko and she gave me her soup, because she brought from home food, so I had another soup from her. I told her about my father, that he is in our village, and that he might send a letter to me or want to know where I am. So one time he sent a bread for me. But he put in a letter in the bread, and they found it. The SS found that. And the girl was-- she paid the fine. She said that somebody sent to her, because she would say that it was sent to me, she would be killed. She paid the fine, and that's the last I heard from my father. I heard that she told me that he had sent me something, but I never got it, because they found it. And then on Yom Kippur we were davening Kol Nidre in the big barrack, men and women. And then all of a sudden, we heard a cry, everybody was crying. A messenger came in with letter that is ZwolęÅ,, got evacuated to Treblinka, to the camp, to the ovens.

I don't think that my mother made it to the train. She had 20 kilometer to go to a train, to go to the oven with five children around her, one smaller than the other. I don't believe she made it.

You never knew never found out?

Never find out and I don't know where.

And you don't know anybody who survived who might have seen her? Not her, but I met someone who saw that my father was shot. And my brother fell down on him and he was crying, so they grabbed him by the collar and put him on the wagon, on the train, to Treblinka.

And I was always hoping that my father would survive, because he was a strong man, and he-- In Poland, was very, very hard with the slaughter, ritual slaughtering. So he escaped many times police and in very dangerous times. So I was hoping that he will survive this war. And after the war when I've been-- I was liberated, I saw every train, when I saw a bus stopping, I was always thinking that he's coming. Never happened. He was killed and with the knife in the hand, it was coming from what he slaughtered.

And. Let's go back to my camp. Before in Skarzysko, a year later, took a year till they build up barracks that the men were separate, and women were separate.

Where did you sleep in the meantime, before the barracks were built?

In that-- it was that one building what I told you, and there were beds.

On top of each other?

On top of each other, and I slept in bunks. Yes, bunks. So we slept it was very good. It was like-- till the end when they built the barracks, we had bunks too, but this was like six beds, one on one, in the barracks were two. were bunks one -- and it was like 10 on each side, was like 20 bunks. And one time I was working from two shifts like from 6 to six in day or six all night to six.

So one time I came home, and I had fever. I was sick. And it was mine turn to wash the floor in the barrack. So I told the manager from the barrack, from our barrack, at the tape put somebody else on my place to do it, and I'll do another time when I get well. She says OK, go to sleep. And 8 o'clock came in a policeman with a German, with an SS said, what happened, the house is-- the room is not washed. Who had to do it? As he shout to me that I had to do it.

He grabbed me out of my bunk, and I was beaten. And I was sick, I fell down, I couldn't move. So after-- it was like 10:00 they open the [INAUDIBLE] where I could go, it's like a clinic. So I went in there, and they put me in the hospital. I had pneumonia. And was in the hospital for a few days then on Sunday came in a group of SS. they picked people who were near to death. So my girlfriend I had from my town from Jankowiec, I had four other girls. So they came in, and they knew about it, they said get dressed and sit down near the bed. Just sit down, dressed so they wouldn't pick you. . So I was safe. They took my-- next to me, a woman. And they shot them. They were near to death. But they ah--

In 1944 they evacuated Skarzysko. How did I-- went to the barracks, to the men, to take their dirty clothes to wash, for a soup. So I brought from the factory water and soap, you know like-- so I was able instead to go to sleep from all night away working. So I was working, took the clothes, I washed. So I had an extra soup to nourish myself.

So went on and on. And nobody thought that we will survive that. Because I was the oldest home but I was never away from home. And being that knowing that I am alone and that I only dreamt that I should be able to tell my mother what I'm going through. That was my only-- what I wanted to survive, to be able to tell the story.

In 1944 we were evacuated from Skarzysko to Leipzig. In the evacuation on the trains, were terrible. We were packed like herring in a can, with no water, with no food, with no nothing. And we came into Leipzig, SS took us over, and they looked over, because they thought maybe we have money and from Skarzysko being two years there, we-- but they send us to beds, and shaved, but who was clean. They didn't shave off the hair. I never was shaved.

And we were working there, the same thing, for ammunition, and the same kind of ammunition. And there were barracks, four bunks one of another, four bunks. And we were working there. The situation there was very bad, because they-- a little piece of bread that you could, paste the wall with it, it was so raw. It wasn't to eat. You wouldn't give an animal a piece of bread like this. And they had soup for lunch so it was the water from something. They had like-- we never saw anything in it, and it was like the water on the top there they gave all the workers, and those who were Polacks or they were Polish girls, so the antisemitism there was so-- Are Jude? Are Jude? They wouldn't give in the mix in the soup should be like something in it, just water, a spoon of water. And it got so bad there, that it was near the liberation, because we heard that the Russians are near Berlin. The Russians are here, the Russians are there. But we had to go to work and we don't know nothing.

One day we went for an appell, you know, standing, the counting.

A roll call.

Yeah. So a bomb fell in the barrack, in Berlin, where we were staying. And one girl got hit, but she was all right, just wounded.

Was this a bomb from an allied plane?

Yes. The planes were flying by like-- and so we went in to the cellar, waiting till the aeroplanes pass by. And then we went to work. And we came home. So in the morning they said that we're going to be evacuated. Where, we didn't know.

I miss something. Can I correct?

Sure.

Before in Skarzysko, they were from the town, they've evacuated, men and women, couples together, so they live together, and when they heard that we're going to be evacuated, so they separated. But the-- being in there in Leipzig, they got to know that the two women became pregnant. This from being in Skarzysko together. They didn't know then. So when they were a ninth month, nobody knew in the barrack. They were sleeping, and with people in it, and they didn't let know anybody. But one Sunday the SS lady came in, and she said, I know there are two women pregnant in this barrack. Come forward. Nobody wants to do that. So she said if nobody comes out and forward, you all going to go down. It was a frost, very cold, bitter cold. You're all going to go down and stay there till they come out and say who it is.

Was this in Skarzysko or in Leipzig?

In Leipzig. Everybody said, Oh because of two women we all have to go down? Because Sunday, we all washed our this striped uniforms and we wore with the blanket on the bunk till it got dry. Though the next day to work, it would dry. But when we have to go down outside to stay, we had to get dressed. So we took the wet uniforms, we put them on, with these wooden shoes, without the-- we didn't have stockings. It's just that like soldiers have these bandages, and bandage their feet. But we didn't have time to bandage our feet because these bandages were washed too. So we just put on the wooden shoes and the wet uniforms. We went outside, and we stood there and the uniforms were frozen on us, you know like ice. And we stood there for hours, till everybody you know they were mad because of these women we should stay. So those two women came out and they said that they are pregnant.

And the next day there they gave birth to two boys. And the next day we were evacuated from Leipzig. And they were on [INAUDIBLE] they couldn't move them because they were after birth. And when we went out from Leipzig, the Russian came in to Leipzig, and they liberated those women, that took them-- their men were in Buchenwald. They took those women with their babies to Buchenwald, and they were liberated together. And I saw one of the women, I saw them in New York with the boy, beautiful boy, but the mother died of cancer. Let's go back to the evacuation.

Yeah.

We were evacuated where, wherever we went, the road near Berlin was burning. We went to all around, and it was burning. And it was pouring. I think God was crying with us, because we were so exhausted, and hungry, and then-- where are we going? So they were struggling to because they heard that the Russians are near. So and it was so pouring that they stopped by a stable, a barn, and they said, we gonna rest here. But it was very cold, but we rested an hour, and we had to go again, with very difficulties. Because when you sit down after such a march, you can't get up.

But we walked and walked, we walked through fields, and it was in the spring. So the people in the fields were already potatoes planted. So people were hungry. And they bent down to dig out a piece of potato. So they shot them and they were remaining like this with a hand in the dirt. They were shot. And we passed by the houses and people had pity on us, they wanted to give us water. They didn't let, the SS didn't let them give us water. They had [GERMAN], we had to march. And whoever didn't march in speed were shot.

But then we came to a point that they said, we're gonna rest here overnight. Gonna rest here overnight. And now

everybody went into the barn. It was fresh hay cut. So we laid down and everybody fell asleep because we were tired. But 12 o'clock they came in. We have to go. We have to go again. So everybody said, we're not going. Do with us what you want, because we can't. The feet gave up, hungry we are, we don't have anywhere to go, do whatever you want. Ten girls went with them.

So and they fired around the barn, where we were remaining, and they left. Then we heard shots. They shot those 10 girls went with them. They shot them. And we went in the morning was like 5:00 in the morning, and we hear voices. How does they say in Russian, [NON-ENGLISH] . The Russians are here. And that we shouldn't be afraid. And so we went out, and two motorcycles came with the Russians. And they said that more are coming. You are free. You don't have to be afraid anymore.

And so we went to the other side of Elba, to the other. And they organized that each farmer takes like eight girls. Each apartment took our girls in, and they gave us on the attic, they took straw and made beds for us, and brought up a loaf of bread like from 20 kilo, a big bread they bake themselves. And with soup, and jam, and milk. While they fix up that we should eat, one auto came with American soldiers. So we had among us was one girl from Warsaw. She knew English. And she went out to them and spoke to them. And we all run down, and a couple of girls were there, remaining in the attic. When we came up, the bread was gone, everything was gone. Those two ate everything. And so they had to bring more for us. But those two girls got sick, very sick, and they died.

So the Americans said if you need anything, come, we have an office there and there, the neighboring town. But we never saw them again. Russians came. And the Russians came, and they said that the girls should take up their bedrooms, the Germans' bedrooms, and let them go on the attic. So they gave us two bedrooms and two beds in each room. So two of us in a bed. And they gave us-- the Russians gave an order that they should give us what our heart desires. Because of them, we look like this. I was 70 pounds, can you imagine. Seventy pounds. So they gave us-- they cook three meals a day, they gave us whatever we wanted. After five weeks, we had to go back to wherever whoever came from, like Poland, mostly were from Poland.

To be repatriated.

Yes, because they said that while we are there, they cannot transport from Germany anything. They cannot take, like cows, because they have to support these people from camp. So we went to the train. In the trains, inside were soldiers. How do girls go-- to -- So we went up to the roof of the train. And we were traveling. Each time when they stopped, we went down first before they went out from the inside the train, and they hid in a ruin and from the bombard houses. And we ate something, then we went up again on the roof. When it came a tunnel we had to stretch out. And we came to Kraków.

I'm going to stop you at this point because we want to change the tape.

OK so we'll continue from here remember where you are, in Krakow.

Right OK.