

Good afternoon. My name is Bernard Weinstein and I'm the director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project at the Holocaust Resource Center. We are affiliated with the Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. Sharing the interview with me is Nancy Kislin.

We are privileged to welcome Mr. Adam Spiro, a survivor presently living in Wayne, New Jersey, who has generously volunteered to give testimony about his experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust.

Mr. Spiro, we would both like to welcome you. And I'd like to begin by asking you if you would tell us a little bit about your early life, the place you came from, and some of your early memories.

I was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1905, from a family that was very much involved in political life, especially Polish socialistic life at the time of Revolution of 1905. As a result of this revolution, one of my brothers was executed by the Russians for attempt on the life of the General [PERSONAL NAME], Governor of Warsaw. And the family was expelled from Warsaw.

So we moved to Lodz, which is a big industrial city, near Lodz. And there I was raised. I went to what is called in Europe a gymnasium. I finished gymnasium and went for the higher study to free city of Donetsk, where I attended a technical institute and finished with a degree of electrical engineer.

I came back to Warsaw and worked as an engineer for the Polish Ministry of Communications.

Excuse me. When you came back to Warsaw, you came back alone or with your family?

No, my family was in--

In Lodz.

Yes, was in Lodz, yes. My father retired soon after I finished school. And they want to live in a small resort.

What was his profession or vocation?

My father was professor of moral-- philosophy, especially moral and ethics in higher classes of gymnasiums and in teacher seminars. His background I think is very interesting. And I will maybe spend a few minutes talking about him.

Please.

He's the son of a very famous Jewish rabbinical family in Poland. And he was raised on the court of [INAUDIBLE], one of the [INAUDIBLE] families in Poland. He was married there to a doctor of a very wealthy family and was supposed to spend his life studying Talmud.

But somehow he got acquainted with the young ladies from Jewish families that were attending the finishing schools in Switzerland. And through the communication with them, acquired lust, I might say, for another life.

He went to Warsaw. And working very hard as a Hebrew teacher, he attended secret educational courses, Polish secret university courses. And that was his education.

These were courses that were forbidden by the Russians.

Yes, they were not-- that was a time when Russia was repressing Polish culture and Polish sentiments in what was then called [INAUDIBLE] Poland. He was then-- that was a time of the emancipation, the Jewish emancipation. And many young people from Jewish Hasidic families in providences were coming to Warsaw looking for the facility to learn.

Some philanthropic families organized a school, which my father directed. And this was a school where he was-- he and

people that worked with him were teaching these young people, preparing them for the maturity examination-- there's a special name for it-- without attending the school.

Matriculation.

Many of these people became very famous people. Because then from this school they went to European universities. And many of them become very famous people. Then when this-- when my brother was killed and father went to prison, and after he was released from prison, he was expelled from Warsaw. Then he went to Lodz.

And as a result of this Revolution of 1905, the Russian government allowed some Polish schooling. Not under the auspices of the Minister of Education, but under the auspices of the Ministry of Commerce. So all the school were somehow called a commerce school.

Does your family--

They were very famous schools in Poland in every big city.

Was your family treated differently in Lodz than they were in Warsaw following the--

Politically, by the government, I don't recall any surveillance or nothing that was a family-- I think that they left father alone.

Yeah. They didn't attempt in any way, in light of their past history to--

No.

--censor or curtail him.

Father was an educator from heart. He was a real educator.

Did he teach in Lodz also, when he was in Lodz?

In Lodz, he taught in the high schools and in teaching seminar. Because there was the schools that were allowed by the Russian government. And then a few years later came the war. And with the war, the independent Poland.

How did your father's family react to him when he--

Estranged, estranged, yes. When my grandfather died and my father went to the funeral, he was almost stoned in this little town in Warsaw from which they came.

The family was Polish oriented. Father was anti-Zionist. Belonged to the group of people that thought that this is a dead idea. That there will never be a place for all the Jews that will want to come to Israel if it becomes independent.

And there was all-- there was a whole philosophical school of anti-Zionists based on this approach.

Were the members of your family intensely nationalistic as far as Poland was concerned, or did you lean more towards socialism?

Some of the members were socialistic. One of my sisters was an important member of the Polish government, with the party, lived in Moscow. And was liquidated by Stalin during the purges in '56. The younger generation, my brother next to me was a patriotic Pole. Was an officer in the Polish army. In secret Polish army at first and then in the normal Polish army.

We would consider ourselves Poles. You know that there was a minority-- three things that Poland had to sign before

the Western countries accepted her as a member of the conference. And according to this minority treaty, the Jews could declare their nationality as a Jewish nationality. Most of the Jews were declaring Polish citizen, [INAUDIBLE] persuasion, Jewish nationality.

Members of my family insisted that we are treated as nationals-- Polish nationals. We were laughed at by Poles. And we were laughed at by the Jews. But this was our belief at that time.

When you say laughed at, were you, or Jews generally, at that time ridiculed or mistreated?

The Jews were-- the period when I was growing up was a period where the Jewish nationality was coming forward in two aspects. One, in the aspect of the Bund with the Jewish culture. And the Zionists with the Hebrew culture.

And both had to-- didn't like, let's say, my approach or my friends that were saying we are Poles and we want to assimilate with the Polish culture. I didn't have any background for a Jewish national life or for Hebrew national life. My culture was Polish.

If I sound a little bit apologetic, it's because later on, after all, our philosophy went bankrupt.

Yes.

So maybe we should have seen theirs, after this bankrupt. But we didn't see it this way. Anyhow, when I finished the school, I came back to Warsaw. As I said, I started to work for the government.

Now, this was-- when I started to work was a time of a good relation between Jews and Poles, between the Jewish organization and the Polish government. That was the time when Pilsudski came back to power. And somehow didn't allow official antisemitism to come to life.

What year was this?

This, 1930-1931. And they were-- in my branch of service were three Jews. One was pretending that he isn't Jewish at all. One was hiding. He didn't allow to talk about his Jewishness. And I was stressing my Jewishness.

I didn't want to be embarrassed by antisemitic remarks or by unpleasant treatment. So by stressing my Jewishness, I was putting myself immediately above the offense. They couldn't-- they didn't dare to offend me. Do I make myself clear?

Yes. By being open about it, you were--

Here was a Jew and--

It was a source of pride to you, rather than--

I never want to work on Jewish holidays. And if once or twice was occasions that I had to come because of emergency, I came dressed up for holiday and not for work. And I have to say that I was very much respected for it.

Were you, yourself, observant? Or was it based mainly in a kind of ethical or moral--

No, only ethical. I wasn't at all observant Jew. I didn't come to work because that was my station. But I didn't belong to the synagogue and I didn't attend synagogue. I wasn't even bar mitzvahed. So entirely moral and self-defense.

Also, I was a Jewish heritage, and the importance and honor of Jewish heritage was very much implanted in me at home.

Yes.

Yes, that we were-- the Jewish philosophy, the Jewish morals, the Jewish-- the Jewish-- how should I say-- the part that the Jews played in the history of the world-- that means the history of a culture-- was very much impressed on us. And I was proud to be a member of this people.

And you were respected for it.

Yes. The first few years, there were no incidents of antisemitism. But later on, Poland became much more dictatorial. And was flirting with Germany.

This was after Pilsudski?

Yes.

After Pilsudski died. And there started to be these unpleasant moments too. There was a group of young Polish nationalists, a very strong group, among my colleagues. And they were, to a certain degree, boycotting me as a Jew. And they were unpleasant situation.

But I also work with the army. My work involved a contact, a very close contact with the signal corps officers of the army. And somehow, all these people that I worked with the army were very fond of me. And they were, if you may say so, protecting me from the outboards.

Also, I sensed that my bosses were also very, very friendly, were appreciative. They liked me. And they appreciate my effort and my contribution to the world. There was an incident in 1938. One of the main antisemitic papers published an article, in which he was accusing our office of tolerating Jews. And there was a sentence there saying that no important decision is made without influence of Mr. Adam Spiro.

So on one hand, the friends started to call in, saying that this is a very unpleasant situation. And my bosses said, they are praising you. You don't have to be concerned. They're saying you are important person. You are an important person.

So when the situation became very unpleasant in the end of 1938, beginning 1939, I was officially told by my supervisors, as long as the constitution is functioning, the constitution of the country, I don't have to worry a bit.

Did you feel that they were looking the other way? Or did you feel that they were sincere?

No, no, they were considering the young nationalists as a bunch of fascists. And the older generation, if it was antisemitic, wasn't fascists. The younger generation were fascists.

Yes.

At that--

I'm sorry.

At that time in 1938, were you aware of what was going on outside your immediate surrounding?

Naturally, naturally. We had a nephew in school and he was suffering. And many friends were suffering. We knew exactly what's going on. Yes, we knew. It wasn't that we were isolated.

And in 1938, I went abroad. And a vacation, but a working vacation. And I was trying to contact the people that I knew in big telecommunications organization in the West if I could eventually get work and get out of Poland.

But coming for a moment back to this. I was attending a German high institute, a German school. And that was in time where Hitler was coming into power. And there were many unpleasant incidents at school.

Now, when I finished, I make my thesis. After defending the thesis, a professor, who was my partner, you might say, congratulate me. And he said to me like this, if that would be a normal time, I would have sent you now to one of the capitals of Europe. And you would be starting a career in the industry.

But this being not a normal time, I cannot do anything for you, he said, but give you one advice. If you will achieve for yourself a name in the industry, nobody will pay attention to if you are Jew or not Jew, but only after you will achieve by yourself a name.

But the same professor, in an international conference approached the Polish delegation and told them about me. And told them if you know what you're doing, you will hire this young man for your services.

The payoff came when the war broke out. And I was evacuated from Warsaw as a part of the inner circle of the ministry. And then two weeks later when Russia came in and Polish government decided to go into exile into Romania, we were taken-- I say myself, my wife, and my daughter were taken in a official bus to Romania.

Although many people in the bus objected that some young Jew is going and taking place of some important personality, the man who was in charge said, the minister itself insisted that Mr. Spiro and his family go with us. So this was the payoff.

And the Germans didn't raise any objection to this?

Who?

The Germans.

The Germans didn't-- they didn't-- they weren't there yet.

Oh, they weren't there yet. I thought the war had already broken out.

We were between the Germans and the Russians. I went through Romania. Now this is also very important. And I would like to talk about this. We came to the place where we have to pass a river, which was a frontier between Poland and Romania. And we didn't have any money, only some zlotys, yes. And I said to myself, I will go into the market. And there are the black marketeers, Jews. And maybe they will help me to get some money.

They went there, and nobody wanted talk with me. Said forget about this. You will never go to Romania, they said. There is a strict policy, very strictly enforced, no Jews. And they told me that there were very, very rich Jews that had plenty of gold and those things happened. So they say you want us to sell you some money and then they would not let you in. You will come back. You will want back your money, forget about it.

OK, so now we are in this bus, deep in the night. And we're going over this river. In the middle of the bridge, the bus has stopped and Romanians come in to inspect. A General, Romanian gendarme-- that means military police-- a general, a big man, big man come.

And the chief of staff of the ministry, who was directing this bus present himself, gives also papers and so on, agreement. And the man says, I would like to talk with the members of the group. OK.

So he goes from group to group, from one seat to another, asks for papers, talks, looks. One of these people that I was talking about that was not willingly admitting that he's a Jew, his name was Joseph Zilberstein-- no, Jacob Zilberstein, Jacob Zilberstein.

And the general takes his papers in hand and says Jacob Zilberstein, you're a Jew, sir. He says, no. So the general says Jacob Zilberstein, you are a Jew. And he says, no. And the boss is quiet. The other people on the bus are quiet. Nobody says boo.

He takes his paper with him and goes farther. And I said-- I'm sitting with my wife and I have my little daughter in [INAUDIBLE]. She's asleep in my arms. And I said, listen, Tonya, if he asks me I'm not denying that I'm a Jew. She said-- he comes to me. And I went to reach for papers here, and here's the child. And he says, no, no, no don't disturb the child. What's your name? I say Adam Spiro. Thank you. And he goes farther.

So we passed this [INAUDIBLE]. We went to Romania.

What happened to Zilberstein?

Oh, he came back to Zilberstein and says, Jacob Zilberstein, you aren't a Jew, but Jacob is a Jewish name, isn't it? And there is a gentlemen sitting nearby and says my name is also Jacob. I am not a Jew. It isn't necessarily a Jewish name. Oh, then everything is all right. And went out, rode the bus.

OK, so we went to Romania. We were there for six months. Professionally it was a very interesting moment because I was asked to write the manual how to sabotage the things that I was building before to function. And the war was progressing. Now at this January 1940, it's a funny war going on, yes.

Two armies are staying on the marginal line doing nothing. And everybody knows that Hitler cannot stay long without doing something. Something must happen. And very possibly he will move, not being able to move West, he will move East. There is a very strong fascistic movement in Romania.

And I said to my wife, what are we going to do? We applied for American visa, but that was far, far in future. So I said to my wife like this. If I will volunteer for the army in France then I will maybe be able to get you a visa to France. Because generally, if the men went to the army to France, the women and children were sent to Algeria to some camp. And that I didn't want.

So we had many discussions about this. It wasn't an easy decision, not at all. But my wife, being a good wife, said if you feel that this is the best, so we'll do it. So I volunteered for the army. And I got permission for her to go to Nice to the family house, as I was said before.

So we went to France. I was supposed to bring her to Nice, arrange for everything, and then go to Paris. But at the frontier, some military officer decided, no, you go out. So our goodbye was in the night, in a crowded train, the five minute stay between the frontier. And said goodbye. She will tell her story.

She had \$50 as the whole our possession that we had at this time. She didn't have any special jewelry that she could sell or nothing. That was it. And the family niece that will accept her or not.

OK, I didn't hear from my wife for the next-- almost a year, almost a year. I went to the army. I don't-- the army was antisemitic. Antisemitic to the nth degree. They didn't learn anything.

From a Jewish point of view, I have to go back for a moment. I'm sorry.

Please. Don't apologize.

When we came first to Romania, we were approaching the Jewish holidays. And we were in a small Romanian shtetl, assigned to a house of a dentist, a Jewish dentist. And this misses of the house very, very delicately asked Tonya if we were Jews. And Tonya says, yes.

So she said, would you like to spend a Yom Kippur with us. And Tonya says I have to ask my husband. Now she comes to me and says, you know, if you accept, you have to fast. She says, you have to play the game. And I said, nobody died from not eating today. They are very friendly, very nice to us. We shouldn't-- I wouldn't like to disappoint them. So for the first time in my life, I observed Yom Kippur.

When war ended, I came back to Nice and we reunited. And again came Yom Kippur. My wife asked me, and how

would we be now? And I said, we don't go back. So this was my introduction, if I say, to the religious Jewish observance.

How did you meet your wife?

Through her [NON-ENGLISH]. Yes, I was renting a room in the house of this lady. And this lady decided that we would be a good match.

Yeah.

Well, I think a very good match. We're very happy in marriage and had a very nice life in Warsaw. I was writing for technical papers and making maybe more money this way than from my salary as an employee. And this is also why I was well known. Because every month, almost every month, there was my name in the monthly professional paper.

So it came-- yes, the war started for us this way that my father was living there in Warsaw. And then in 1939, he was-- '39-- he was 73 years old. And he was tall, straight. And he said, what? You're kidding about the war. He is trying his best to get what he can, but he never would go to war against France, England. That was the last time that I saw my father.

What happened to him?

He was finished in ghetto. It means, there was an extermination camp near Warsaw. What was the name? The whole family, everybody that was in Warsaw, perished.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

In Warsaw at that time, I had a brother with his family. And I will pay honor to my nephew. He was an-- a virtuoso pianist. He finished conservatorium, a musical conservatorium while he was in the sixth class of gymnasium. And couldn't get his diploma from conservatorium because that was a institute of higher education. Had to first make maturity examination.

He was in London in 1939, in the beginning of 1939, taking part in a competition of young artists. And he got the second prize because he was the youngest and didn't have a large hand yet. And play a concert at Buckingham Palace for now Queen and her sister. Was invited to play for them.

And he was giving concert in ghetto. And was taken from one of the concerts by the Germans. And so he went. And father went, and brother and sister, and naturally, plenty of family.

My wife didn't lose anybody. She had at that time sister in Warsaw, but the sister went to Russia and save herself there. OK, so now is the war. And everybody knows how it went. The French capitulated. And there was a situation that we didn't know if the Germans will accept our military status. That means from the Polish people that came from Poland, or will declare them guerrillas.

So this was decided, that whoever wants would try to get to Switzerland if Switzerland will admit them. So I also went into that forest and tried to reach Switzerland, but was caught almost at the Swiss frontier by the Germans. And when I was caught in the night, a German-- an Austrian [INAUDIBLE] came to me and look at me and said, [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. Yeah, I believe he knew that. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

He wouldn't reveal anything. He wouldn't betray, is that what he said?

Excuse me?

How would you translate that, that he wouldn't--

Oh, he says nothing will happen to you.

Nothing will happen to you.

So don't be afraid. Nothing will happen to you.

Was this an officer?

No, a soldier.

A soldier.

A soldier. Then, so we were sent to a small [INAUDIBLE]. And there I was treated very, very badly. There was a volksdeutscher from Poland, from Silesia. And he said to me, the Fuhrer said that if the war will come that would be the fault of the Jews and Jews will pay. And you are the Jew and you will pay.

And he forced me to do dirty work. And I was very, very unhappy. And after a few days, I saw an officer, a German officer from far away. And I yelled to him. And he came over and says, what's the matter? And I said I'm a soldier, a captive soldier, why do I deserve such a treatment?

And this officer took me from the soldier. Brought me to another part of the floor. Gave me a bath. Took me to the magazines and gave me new underwear and new uniform because everything was soiled and stinked.

Again, they brought me back, if I may say, to the civilization. And sent me away from there to the bigger camp in Belfort. A big city in France and there were assembly points for the prisoners of war that were in Belfort at the time that I was in the group, maybe 100,000 prisoners of war. And hunger, because the Germans said that the French when they were treated, they treated the wheat with petroleum. So now we had to eat this-- everything smelled petroleum-- bread, and soup, and everything.

And in this camp one day, they declared that all the Jews have to come forward under the penalty of death, immediately, or it's a big penalty. So I went also to this assembly place. And from there, they took us to another barracks.

Approximately how many Jews were there?

From this place we were maybe 20. But they took us to the barracks where there were about 300 Jews. And when we approached this barracks, a Jewish non-commissioner officer was in front of the barrack, talking very friendly with German non-commissioner officer in German, because he was [INAUDIBLE]. And he was in as a young man in the German army.

Ends up was the barracks that were only Jews there. Now, while we were starving in this other barrack, in this barrack with the same diet. Somehow everything was very nice. Was a Jewish cook. And he knew how to do the thing and everything. Beautiful that we had linen. We were sleeping in beds with linen. We were there.

But that's dream. But the dream lasted only about a week. And now, again, we were transferred to another barracks. Now we came to a very, very huge place. And when we came in there was a fire, open fire going on. And we were ordered to make a circle around this.

And a civilian came in and start to insult us, the Jews-- dirty Jews, and this, and this, and this. And we don't recognize any rank among Jews.

Was this a German or a Vichy?

German.

German.

German, yes. Excuse me, he was a Alsatian.

Alsatian.

That means a French citizen. And he was one of the big heads of the nationalist party, nationalist socialist party in Alsace. A big shot. Anyhow, they make a scene like from a Dreyfus film.

He called the officers forward and he ripped their insignia.

The chevrons.

No officers, no signia. A big, big parade. And we're staying there, cold, and tired, and looking at him, and saying, what is the meaning of all this? What does it mean for us? It meant for us that they sent us to the-- not to the normal barrack, but to the stables for horses. And there was some straw on the floor, that much. And you dirty Jews, that is where you will be living, working, living, and starving.

And as we were sitting there and trying to assess the situation, comes a troop of German soldiers with a bayonet. We were uncertain by then. And comes a German officer. And he says, now this is not a comedy, he says. This is now a serious business. Some of your people, he says-- officer says-- went into the line of the prisoners that were ready to be shipped out and took the food portions that were reserved for these outgoing prisoners.

So they are now your friends that are going into Germany without food. And that we'll not allow. Either, he says, in a half an hour I have back this ten portions that were taken or I will take a very, very severe repercussions.

We looked at each other. We didn't know each other. Yes, there were 300 Jews, but we didn't know each other. But there was a group of Algerian Jews there. And one of the officers went-- the Jewish officers went to them and said, hey, fellas, what about? So they admitted that they took this. When they saw a line that was getting bread, they went into line and take two portions. They admit that and they gave back that portions and the incident was closed.

Only we were told that the next morning we'll have to be ready at 6 o'clock for work. Good. So who could sleep, slept, who couldn't, didn't sleep. And at 6 o'clock in the morning, we were ready. We wait, we wait, we wait. We don't have anything to eat, coffee, nothing.

At 10 o'clock came a few trucks with the German soldiers. And one of the sergeants asked where are the kommando, working kommando. We said, we are working kommando. He said, I need 50 people and not 300. So volunteers. So I also went out, because always better to go and work than sitting in a room. Fresh air is always better.

So we went on these trucks, they took us. This was [INAUDIBLE]. That means engineers. And then they were gathering the munitions of the French left on the fields when they were running away from everything. And they were gathering them.

They treated us fabulously. They gave us food. They were very, very nice to us. And I worked with them from, I would say, August to November.

Of what year?

1939. And I didn't have any worry with them, but I had a big worry with my colleagues. Because we were then assigned to normal rooms in barracks, this comedy with, I would say, horse barracks was finished very, very quickly. The army took over and the army was a very strict, but we were prisoner of war under the control of the Geneva Convention.

So everything was-- we were Jews. We were separated from other in a separate barracks. We were warned not to mix with anybody else. But otherwise, they left that alone. So Alsatian went into one room. Romanian went into another

room. The Parisian Jews, that means the oriental-- the East European Jews that lived in Paris in another room.

And I didn't belong to any one of these groups. So somebody comes to me and says, [NON-ENGLISH]. No, I don't know Yiddish. I don't speak Yiddish. And they look at me from the Polish army. It was very-- they didn't know what to do with me. I didn't know what to do with them. And they decided that most probably I am not a Jew. A very, very unpleasant situation, very unpleasant.

And then comes one man out. Says to me, where from are you? I said, Warsaw, Lodz. Lodz? He says, what's your name? I said, Adam Spiro. Who was your father? My father was a teacher, professor. Oh, Professor Spiro's son? He says, I know him. He is all right. So here I am introduced to the company by a thief, a procurer, [INAUDIBLE] character, as they say, as it can be. But he is my protector. He knows me.

Now [INAUDIBLE].

Mr. Spiro, we're going to have to pause for a few minutes in order to change the tape.

Yes.

So we'll continue with the story momentarily.