

Good morning. I'm Bernard Weinstein, Director of the Kean College Oral Testimonies Project at the Holocaust Resource Center. Assisting in this interview is Marcia Weisberg. We are pleased to welcome Pearl Lucy Shames. Mrs. Shames, I'm glad you're here.

My pleasure being here because I know it's for a worthy cause. My name is Pearl Lucy Shames. They pronounce it here, "Shay-mus," but it really doesn't matter. I was born in Vilna in year 1921 according to my papers. But there is a story attached to it.

See, my mother was busy giving birth to me. A certain General Zeligowski was busy delivering Vilna to Poland from Lithuania, and I was born during the transition time. When my mother went to the hospital, it was still Lithuania. When she came back, it was Poland. That's why I was registered three months later, and they made me younger three months. So my official birth date is January 6, 1921.

I spent my whole life in Vilna. When I was 6 years old, my father passed away. He was-- he had cancer of the liver, which wasn't actually discovered till two years before he died. It was very hard for me. My mother remained a widow with three children. My older sister was at that time a teenager. My brother was 13 years old, and I was 6 years old.

The way he died and the day he died I remember very, very well-- very distinctly. It was two days before he died, my nanny or whoever it was-- a housekeeper-- dressed me and took me away to my relatives who lived not far away. I didn't know the reason why they took me away. I was actually happy because my cousins were there and I could play with them. And it was much more fun than at home.

After two days, the same housekeeper came. I got dressed by her, and she took me by the hand and brought me home. When we approached the yard, she says to me, you know, child, you don't have a father anymore. Your father is dead. And this is how I found out about it.

I came home and in the living room was a black coffin with a little rose on it. And up till now I see the picture before my eyes. But I don't even know if it was proper because according to what I know now, Jewish funerals there were not supposed to be flowers. And now I think maybe it was an artificial little rose. But this I remember very well.

My family was-- my mother was crying, of course. And my sister was fainting. And my brother, who was 13 years old just after bar mitzvah, took me by the hand and said, don't look at your sister. She's always like this. We have to think of our mother. She remained a widow now, and she has to take care of us, and we have to make it easier for her.

My father used to own a lumber yard on [? Zevalna ?] Street in Vilna. But after he died, my mother had no choice. She had to take you it over, though actually it wasn't a business for a woman.

What was your maiden name?

My maiden name? My maiden name was Gorman. G-O-R-M-A-N. A very popular name here. And I'll tell you a story later about it also. We had no relatives at all. And I knew in Vilna, at that time, whoever has a name Gorman must be a relative. But when I came to this country I just realized that this story is different here.

So after that, life was very difficult. My sister was going to school, and my brother was going to school. At that time in Vilna-- same probably in Poland altogether-- was the system-- the system for education was a certain kind of mixed up. Elementary schools up till seventh grade were public, and they were free for everybody to attend-- Polish, of course. If you're talking about Yiddish schools, these were already maintained by the Jewish community. And they weren't even subsidized by the government.

Did you live in an area that was largely Jewish? Or did you live in an area that was mixed?

It was mixed, but there was a lot of Jewish people there. It wasn't like a ghetto-- here we are not allowed to live. But by itself, somehow the Jews were trying to live there where they have their own people except for the very rich ones. You

see, the very rich ones didn't mind. And they could afford to live in the better areas of the city. I had a couple of rich children of-- friends, children of rich people, and we used to go to visit them and I saw how they lived. But we were OK. But we didn't have any problems.

So my mother could not-- but my brother and my sister were going to a private school. A private school because a private school, after you went to send children to the gymnasium, you had to send them to a private school. And the tuition was horrendous at this time. I would say at this time it was something like 500 zlotys a year. I think it was five zlotys a dollar at this time, but it's hard to compare this time.

But if you had three children, for the third child you could already have in school for free. But by the time I was supposed to go to gymnasium, my sister was already out. And my mother would have to pay the whole tuition she couldn't afford.

So somebody suggested that since I was considered a very bright girl at this time-- I don't know if it was true, but that's what they said-- I should try to get into a state school, state gymnasium, which we had two kinds-- for boys and for girls. They were not coed. There were two gymnasiums for boys and two for girls.

And in order for a Jewish child to get into the school, you had to go through entrance exams and be within the first five on the list according to your merits. Polish children could get in very easily because it was meant mostly for children of government workers, city workers. And they paid either nothing or a very small tuition. The others were supposed to pay 120 zlotys a year, which was also very reasonable at that time.

So I tried. And I remember I went-- I was nine, over 9 years old when I had to take the exam. And it was about 15, 20 minutes' walk from where I lived. My mother, of course, wanted to take me there. So I said, no, I'm not a child anymore. I'm going to go to gymnasium. I'm going by myself. And I was the only child who came all by herself.

I took the exam. I even remember right now the exam we had from two subjects-- Polish and arithmetics. And I did very well. And when we had to find out who got accepted-- this was within a week-- I went again by myself. And I looked through the list, and I found my name. It was in Polish-- Gorman<sup>3</sup>wna. That was the addition they usually-- if you are a girl it's <sup>3</sup>wna. And if it's ladies, would be Gormanowa. So I was Gorman<sup>3</sup>wna.

And I came home very happy to my mother's lumber yard. I said I am accepted to the gymnasium. This was 1930-- yes, September 1930 we started.

The first years in school were OK. We had-- our class-- we had 45 girls. And out of this 45, we had seven Jewish girls. It was an unwritten law that they would accept nothing more than between 10% usually. Some grades had a lower amount of Jewish girls. Somehow in our class they probably were all bright girls, and they made it.

There was no coeducation? There was no--

Not in the state schools. There were coeducational schools-- private gymnasium. So it was very easy for me. It was very easy for me. I had no problems with studying. I was always either the first or the second in school. And I was trying to help the others also.

But strangely enough, the Gentile girls were very nice to us for a certain reason, I think. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm prejudiced. We were always the best, and we were the ones who were helping them out in school. Not that we ever socialized with them. I don't think I was even-- maybe once I went to visit one of my Gentile friends because she asked me to come and help her with some homework. But we didn't see any hostility.

I must admit that our principal was a very decent woman. She was the wife of a Minister of Agriculture, I think, in Poland. Her name was [? Staniewiczowa. ?] And I heard later that she was the one who saved a couple of Jewish girls from our school, which it to her credit of course. So in the beginning was not bad.

But around 1933 or '34-- I don't exactly remember now-- there happened an incident where Jews were accused of killing

a Polish student by the name [? Watslawski. ?] I remember it so distinctly that after this happened, I came to school, and all of a sudden maybe 50% of our class-- girls-- Gentile girls were wearing green ribbons. And the green was the color of solidarity with they called them Narodna Demokratska. And this were the very anti-Semite, rightist movement, which was sympathetic to Hitler who, at that time already of course, was an important person in Germany.

And we felt terrible. In the beginning I couldn't understand what it meant. But times made me grow up, and I understood later what it all meant. They just didn't want to have anything in common with us.

Was this also a nationalist group?

A nationalist group, yeah. A group which was always against Pilsudski. By the way, I'm going to mention Pilsudski because when Pilsudski was alive, still the life in Vilna-- on Poland altogether-- of the Jewish people was much better because officially anti-Semitism was not allowed. I mean, there are always ways, I don't have to tell you. But officially it was against the law.

He even had established, kind of, a Jewish-- but it wasn't a Jewish public elementary school but a elementary school taught in Polish. But Jewish children mostly attended it. And the name of the school was Berek Joselewicz School. And Berek Joselewicz was one of the fighters, I think, for Polish independence during World War I.

When did Pilsudski die?

I'm going to tell you about it because this is also a landmark in my history. In 1935-- I belong to the school choir. I happen to sing not bad. So in 1935, the school organized a trip to Warsaw, Poznan, Gdynia, Bydgoszcz. And it was the school-- it's like a-- it's the choir-- the school choir was going to perform in these cities. And the name of the show was Vilno M<sup>3</sup>wi, which means in Polish, Vilno Speaks. And this was in commemoration of the great poet Adam Mickiewicz. So we were supposed to recite parts of his poetry and also sing songs.

We had quite a few Jewish girl in the choir. But I was the only one who was sent because according to them I didn't look Jewish. And it's not because they didn't want to take Jewish girls. Since we were going to the Western part of Poland where the anti-Semitism was much more obvious, they didn't want to expose us to this. Nobody told me about it, but I knew about it. And I wound up the only Jewish girl in the whole group. And of course our choir teacher was with us and the girls were very, very nice to me, I must say. I don't know why but somehow, except for the incident in 1933-34, I never had any problems.

During the way, when we were still in the train, somehow our teacher received a telegram from the principal that Pilsudski died. And she didn't know what she's supposed to do since he died it's morning in the country how can we go and perform? So she got in touch on the station when the train stopped by telephone with the principal. And the principal said, this is a very important celebration, and go ahead. You don't have to dance and to have a good time, but you are to perform. And we were very happy. And everybody was crying including me.

The word celebration was used?

It was the celebration of Adam-- commemorating the work of Adam Mickiewicz. And it was a very important event for Vilna because Vilna was considered something less important than the Central Poland and the western part. They used to call it [INAUDIBLE]. It means the eastern frontier of Poland, let's put it this way. Many--

The boondocks?

Huh?

Way out?

Yeah, because people were under the influence of the Russians still. And many people were even speaking with a Russian accent. Yet another thing why they took me-- because they said I didn't speak a Vilna Polish, I spoke at Warsaw

Polish. I don't know.

And you also spoke Russian?

No, at that time not. In my home, my parents used to speak Russian. But I didn't speak. I understood everything, but I didn't speak. I didn't learn Russian.

So we were happy about it that we were going to see Warsaw, and Poznan, and Gdynia, and Bydgoszcz. And we came safely home. And as everybody expected after Pilsudski's death, life for the Jews was not the same.

We started feeling very distinctly this freedom on their part. They used to call him dziadek, you know? This was grandpa. Pilsudski had this big mustache, and he had a nice looking-- to me I always liked even to look at him. And somehow the Jewish people felt pretty safe when he was around.

As a matter of fact, at that time-- it was 1935, before even his death. Before this, I personally joined a Jewish youth-- Zionist youth movement. And this has also a story attached to it. See, the Zionist movements were legal in Poland. They were not-- the communists were illegal, but Zionism was legal. But since I was going to a Polish state school, you were not allowed to belong to any outside organization-- only the scouts in school. So this was for us, in a way, illegal.

But one of our Jewish girls introduced us. And all the Jewish girls of my class joined this organization called Hanoar Hatzioni this time it was it was an [INAUDIBLE] how do you call it the Central Zionist Movement not Hashomer, not Betar, but the central. I think Weizmann was our leader at that time.

And it was also an interesting story. My mother was always very strict, in a way. She knew I was a good student and obeyed all the rules of school. But when I came to her and I told her, mother, I would like to join a Zionist movement, but it's illegal in school, what do you think about it? She thought for a while and she said to me, you know something, I think it's not a bad idea. I didn't believe what I hear. She says, because if you will not join the youth movement, you will probably start using lipstick on your lips, and looking for boys, and going dancing. At this your head will be busy with other things. And that was it.

And since my girlfriend were very always looking up to me, since my mother let me join, so they all joined also. And we created a special group there. Actually everybody there spoke Yiddish. And we were even speaking Polish because we were used in school. I must say that at home we spoke only Yiddish with my mother.

Did you know any Hebrew?

Hebrew we learned in school because you know what it was? In the state school it was obligatory to have a great religion. And since our Gentile Christian girls had religion in schedule, so we used to come after 4 o'clock on a Sunday and supposedly a rabbi would come and teach us chumash you know, and Hebrew ethics. And so I knew a little Hebrew from this. But otherwise I didn't know. And when I came to this Zionist movement, then I learned a little bit. Maybe not speaking but singing the songs at that time.

Excuse me, Pearl, when you say that the Zionist organization was illegal, what was the penalty if you--

I could have been expelled from school, that's all--

Expulsion.

That's all--

In a Polish school--

The Polish state school they didn't want you to belong to any outside organization. Otherwise it was legal, absolutely. As a matter of fact, a class below us, all the Jewish girls belonged to a communist movement. And this was even worse.

But we used to cover each other. We knew about them, and they knew about us, and it was OK. Nobody ever discovered.

I graduated from high school, from gymnasium-- I'm used now to the term high school-- gymnasium actually. It was eight years. It was this way-- after four years of elementary school, you entered a gymnasium. So all together it made 12 years. That's same as here.

But I must say that our program was excellent. We learned so much history. We learned Latin for five years. Foreign language, which I took German. I had a choice of German, French. I took German, and it helped me later. And really it was a very, very good curriculum.

I graduated in 1938, and of course, my mother wanted very much for me to go to enter the university for higher education. But it wasn't so easy for a Jewish student even with good grades to enter the university. You could enter liberal arts. It was very easy. But this was a field which didn't give you any-- if you want to-- if you graduated to become a teacher, again, it was very difficult to get a job.

So actually most of the girls used to just enter to meet a nice boy who is going to medical school and get married. And that's it. But I didn't have these ambitions. I decided I'm going to learn a profession to make a living to make it easier for my mother. And I entered one year commerce school.

By the end of the school year when I was supposed to pass the exams, a friend of mine told me that her aunt has a pension in Druskininkai was a resort place where the rich people used to come. And she's looking for somebody who will be the administrator in this pension, maybe I would like to get the job since I'm going to commerce school. So I said, that's fine but I'm not finished yet. The exams are going to be given in June and now it's beginning of May. So she says, speak to the director, maybe he'll give you the diploma anyway. And sure enough I spoke to him and he was so thrilled that a student of his is going to get a job right away. He said, don't worry, I'll send you the diploma to your work place. And I was very happy because I hated exams.

So I went there, and this was the year 1939. I came there May 15. And my job was actually to register all the people and to keep the log book. And then by the end, when they leave, they had to pay me and so far.

Also I had to get in touch with all the suppliers, meat, groceries, and so. She was a very old woman, and she always left everything-- these things for me. I didn't even have time over there-- I was afraid I'm going to gain weight, but I never-- because I was always weight conscious-- but I never even had time to eat my meal that the waitresses used to bring me-- my meal to my little desk. And I was eating while talking to people.

And it was a funny incident-- among the guests one day, I met my aunt from Warsaw. My mother had a younger sister from Warsaw. The whole family was in Nowogrodek. But this sister lived in Warsaw. And her husband was a CPA, and he made a nice salary. And they used to go for vacations to the Druskininkai I had no idea that they are going to be here. And I was so pleasantly surprised that I meet them and my cousin who was-- I love her like a sister. And even if I didn't have time for her but during the night we used to talk nights and sing together.

And while I was in Druskininkai my brother at that time returned from the army where he was serving two and a half years, because, see, in Poland, a boy was supposed to go to the army when he was 21 years old. There was also a trick to it. If somebody had a gymnasium diploma, the law was that he would automatically become an officer with a rank. Because if you have a gymnasium diploma, it means you can't be just like enlisted men. You were right away an officer after a couple of months of training.

On the other hand, they didn't want Jewish officers. So what they did most of the time, the people who graduated and had diplomas, they would wind up somehow beyond the amount of the people which they need to draft this particular year. And this way, if three years in a row you were out and you are out of the army. So for Jewish boys with a gymnasium diploma, it was very good.

However, my brother since my mother was a widow as I told you and he felt responsible to help her in the business. He

got out of the-- I think-- of the junior year from the gymnasium. He went to work with her in the business.

And after that, he somehow wound up in the army, of course. So this was one of the things-- well, I don't know what would have happened anyway. But he was the first one to be drafted when the war broke out, and was one of the few boys from Vilna who didn't remain because the whole war was three weeks. And we never had a notice that he was killed. But we had a notice that he disappeared without-- we don't know where he is.

So when I was in Druskininkai this summer, I remember the end of August somehow people started being very nervous. And most of the people were from-- not from Vilna-- but from Warsaw, from Bialystok. And they kept standing at the telephone booths and calling home. And it was already the rumors were that Poland is going to be invaded by the Germans. And around the 20th of August everybody disappeared including my family-- my aunt, uncle, and cousin.

Between the 20th and 24th, my lady-- the boss lady and I, we were the only ones who remained there. And there was no means already to come home because they requisited all the-- how many cars were there-- but these trucks and everything. And the railroad station, the railroad tracks, everything was taken by the army. And we didn't know what was going to happen.

But by some miracle somehow-- I had a step father at this time already. My mother got married, and he was drug salesman. And somehow he got a way to come and to pick me up the 24th of August. I came home my brother was gone already. I didn't see him. And I never saw him again. And this was the beginning of the war for me.

I don't know if you would like to know a little more about before the war which I continue.

Please, whatever you want to say.

OK. After Vilna was already in war, you have the agreement which was made between Germany and Russia that our part of the country wound up in the Russian side and the Western part of the German side. We were lucky of course because we all thought that we are going to wind up with this Nazi Germany. So we were really very lucky about it, and were happy about it.

And it was hard. Lines all over for food, for bread, for-- everybody was keeping all the merchandise that they had, they kept in case they were need to get a piece of bread later. But on the other hand, we were free of the nightmare of Hitler.

The only thing was-- it was a funny situation-- the very rich people were sent away because they were considered the Bourgeois. And the Soviet decided-- the Soviet government decided to get rid of them, punish them. And they were sent to Siberia. And I remember-- this was so funny-- a man who we knew, he had a sort of textiles-- very rich man. He had a very long nose and his name was Nose for some reason I don't know. His name-- his last name was Nose. And we saw him on the trucks when he was taken away, and we were all so upset.

And he says to us in Yiddish, he says, don't worry. You will envy that I'm taken away. And you know something? He survived. He survived somewhere in the Russian camps while the other ones perished.

We often hear that some people escaped from the Russian Occupation to go west thinking that it would actually be worse under the Russians than it was under the Germans. Did you know of anyone in that situation?

Yes. Nobody escaped. But I know also that when the-- later in 1941 when the Germans came, some of the rich people were very happy. They thought they would get their businesses back because they remembered the First World War when the Germans really-- the Germans really helped a lot of Jewish people. And they thought this is the same thing that's going to be happening now. But unfortunately they were very, very, very wrong.

But this was a different situation. This was-- the people were just exiled to Siberia because as very rich people that was their policy. And turned out-- not everybody-- but many of them survived. Many of them survived actually. Actually more of them survived in the camps than, of course, here-- in camps in Siberia than in the labor camps than here.

The first thing I did was register to the university. My dream came true. What I couldn't do during the Polish, I could do now. I went and I registered. I always wanted to go for medicine but for some reason for medicine it was very competitive always. So I decided I'll go register and take biology courses and eventually maybe later I'll be able to transfer-- with my credits I'll be able to transfer to medical because--

It didn't matter that you were Jewish?

At that time, no. At that time, we already were Soviet citizens. And at that time we didn't feel anything. We were only very happy. We were the happiest people in the world even if we didn't have enough to eat.

This was what year?

This is 1939-1940. I registered to school and I took general biology courses. It was all so strange because we started in Polish, and then we went to Russian, and then we went to Lithuanian. And Lithuanian was a completely strange language for me because I never heard of the language.

And the way we were listening to the lectures is we were trying-- whatever we understood from the professor's lectures, we wrote in Polish. And then we used to translate it from Polish into Russian. At that time I knew already Russian because you know it was the Soviet government and we were learning. And Russian was not a strange language for me. I heard it in the house.

And during this time it happened that they made some kind of agreement, and Russia gave Vilna to Lithuania. They made a gesture. So they gave-- they say that Lithuania always wanted Vilnius, so they gave it to them.

And all of a sudden life started being different. People opened stores. And we started getting these beautiful turkeys from unheard-of relatives from Lithuania. And people started to dress. And cafes were open. And life was like before because-- by the way, the ruler of Lithuania was Smetona at this time and he was very good with Jews. He was like Pilsudski in Poland. He had his own Jews. And he helped these businesses, and there was no anti-- I mean there was always anti-Semitism, but not on the surface. Never.

So everyone, all the Jewish people were very happy. Unfortunately, this didn't last for long. And as you know from history now we know it's not true. But at that time, we knew it wasn't true at that time that Lithuanians were begging the Soviet Union to accept them into their imperium. And all of a sudden we became Lithuanian Socialist Republic within one year, which actually our studies it didn't affect too much because the same university-- only they call it rector at that time. I know how you would translate it this-- the president of the university probably was-- they removed him and they put another one, who was a communist, in charge.

But the students actually didn't feel-- well, yeah we did feel because all of a sudden we had to learn [INAUDIBLE] which means the history of the Marxism-Leninism. And this was the most important subject in your-- if you didn't pass this, you couldn't graduate from school. And this you had every day, and you had to-- it was like the Bible, you know.

But as I said it was bearable. And I even got a stipend, so it was a little easier for me. I didn't have to work. But unfortunately this also was for a very short time.

And this was also an interesting event. The cousin, I was mentioned before, with her family they flew from Warsaw to Nowogród because in Nowogród lived my grandfather, and my uncle, and my aunt. So my uncle came there by foot-- the men-- because men were afraid that they are going to be taken away right away by the Germans. And the family came later.

And this year she graduated from gymnasium in Nowogród. And she writes me a letter-- I'm going to see you-- because Nowogród didn't have a university-- I'm going to register in Vilna University where I'm going to live with you. And I was so happy I couldn't-- and this was-- the day was June 22. She was supposed to arrive from Nowogród by railroad to Vilna.

June 22, '41?

June 22, 1941. And I am so happy. I didn't listen to the radio. And I get up in the morning and I go to meet her at the terminal. And while I go, I hear all the sirens. I didn't understand what it is. I come to the terminal, the door is locked. So I ask a militiaman, I said, what's going on here? He says, "Citizen, don't you know what's going on? Hitler invaded-- Hitler declared war against Russia, and right away go to the shelter." I went to the shelter because they were bombing already. I went to the shelter. And of course that was the end of my story with my cousin. This was June 22, 1941.

And I went back home, of course. Everybody was in panic because everybody knew already by now what to expect. We knew even better because of the refugees who came also to us from Warsaw, from the western part of the country, which they fled and for a while they lived here.

And life started getting from bad to worse. We're forced to-- first we had a curfew hour. And I remember I also had an incident here. When I was in the university I met a boy who-- we were courting each other. And we were supposed to get married actually because our parents already were talking about it. And we knew, my parents knew, his parents-- my mother, I mean.

And it was a curfew and he came once to visit me. And then it was 6 o'clock, and my mother said, you can't go home now because you live 20 minutes away from us. And they were thrown out from their house because they were also rich people. So they had their own house, so they lived somewhere in the outskirts. And his father, I think, was already taken away. Yeah, his father was taken away.

So he says, I have to go home because my mother is going to be very nervous. And he went. And this night, the Germans came and took away him and his brother. And I always felt if I would have kept him, maybe somehow, maybe-- all these things come to your mind.

So we had a curfew hour. We started to wear the yellow stars. And we were not supposed to go-- it was a law that we're not supposed to go on the sidewalks, but we had to go in the middle of the street where the horses were. We didn't have too many cars, but there were horses there.

And every night we went to sleep we didn't know what's going to happen. And then people started talking about ghettos-- the ghetto. And you know something? I think we liked this idea because we thought as soon as we come to the ghetto, they will leave us alone, and we will be able to move around. So we will live in a certain quarter.

Before they took us to the ghetto, I think a couple of weeks ago, there was a-- we called it a provocation-- there was a provocation that somebody shot a German from the window on the street, a Jew from the Jewish street. And that's why they removed all the Jews from this area, and took them away-- we didn't know what they did with them at that time-- but took them away.

Then we realized that they needed the space for us. That's why they had to remove all the population from this section, and bring us over there. But we didn't know about it. And then one of these-- I think it was September, we heard a knock on the door. And two Lithuanians-- not Germans-- Lithuanian soldiers came and they told us that within a half an hour we take all the belongings you can and we're going to take you to a separate place, to a ghetto.

How much can you take in half an hour? We didn't know what to take. I think it was my mother, and my stepfather, and myself, and my stepsister. My sister at that time was already married, so she was living somewhere else. And we grabbed-- I don't know what we grabbed. I think a loaf of bread. I think we started putting on on ourselves clothes as much as we can though it was still warm in September. And then I think we took a little carriage. We had like a baby carriage and we put some things, but it was very little.

In our house we had, I think, eight apartments. All Jewish people. Only the janitor was Christian-- no, we had one Polish woman living also there. As a matter of fact, this Polish woman, we left some of our things with her because we thought maybe if we'll be alive, maybe she'll give it to her. We told her just to move into our apartment and use whatever she wants.



On the way-- I knew already Lithuanian at this time because I was going to school. On the way when we had to cross the street-- it was very close-- we lived very close to the place where the ghetto was. Maybe, I don't know, maybe 20 yards or something. We had just to cross the street.

While we were crossing the street I said to one of the soldiers-- I knew there were two ghettos-- I said, which ghetto are you going to take us? In Lithuanian I asked him. He took a look at me, he says to me, I was going to take you to the second ghetto, but since you speak so beautiful Lithuanian, let's go to the first. I think this save the life for a while of our whole apartment building. And afterwards all the people came to me and said to me in Yiddish, [SPEAKING IN YIDDISH].

You saved our lives.

You saved our lives. And I didn't know how-- I was just talking to him. What I'm trying to tell you how plain-- by accident, you never knew--

Fate.

--fate-- what could help you in just escape death? Because the people from the second ghetto, right away, were taken away to Ponary. We didn't know what Ponary meant. But they were taken away first to jail, and then to Ponary. And we didn't know what happened to them.

Of course we came there, it was terrible. We didn't know where we're going. We just came to a place where we saw many people already. And so we also came there, the four of us, with our bundles. And it was our apartment on the Radnicka-- Radnicka Street right at the gates of the ghetto.

You see, the ghetto, the entrance to the ghetto, was a wooden gate. It was just a street divided into two. Part of the street belongs to the outer part. And this part already was the ghetto.

Now the windows of our apartment were facing the outside world. So they were blocked with wood. We shouldn't even be able to look at this outside part. The situation was terrible, but everybody was-- as I said, we thought that in the beginning it's going to be hard, but later at least we will be safe here because that's our place. And we'll be here with our own people, and we'll somehow survive.

And let me tell you something, it was very hard in the beginning. But later the life in the ghetto-- the ghetto became like a miniature city or town. It was chaos in the beginning, really chaos. People were dirty, and there was no place to wash. But the first thing they organized-- they made a bath house. And then they made somebody responsible in each apartment, which might have had 30 people, but one was responsible for the sanitary conditions there-- a woman usually who didn't go to work. And they were washing the floor and most of them was very clean. And if not, the sanitary police, which was organized by the ghetto government would come and give you summonses if it was dirty.

So within a few months we got rid of lice, of everything. And it was-- in this horrible condition, it was clean. We might-- in our room, where I was, we were five, six people. One man slept on the table and he had very long feet. We were always laughing that why didn't he have an extension so he would have room for his feet because we didn't have too much room to put even in a wooden cot in there.

I slept with my mother and my sister in one small cot. And then there was a situation like this. Some of the people decided that the best thing is to somehow go out of the ghetto during the day. We couldn't go out by ourselves, of course-- there was somebody with us-- and work for the Germans and be able to maybe bring a piece of bread because somehow maybe you'll find somebody-- meet somebody who is not Jewish who wants something-- a piece of stocking that somebody had and he will give you a piece of bread or a little salt. And that's the way we would live.

Later they already introduced a system of rationing also within the ghetto. Plus, we were getting 125 grams a day bread. You know how much 125 is? It's not enough to live and not enough to die, but that's what they give. And this was after

a long time already when they are registered and everything.

But this was still-- somehow the Jewish people have something in them that in the worst situation they will find a way how to live. The children started going to school. All of a sudden, somehow school got organized. And the children started going to school.

Men most of the time-- what they did, the German, they would come to the ghetto and they would recruit people to work because after all they wanted to have some use out of us. Otherwise 125 grams is also too much for the Jews. So they recruit some people for work. And the ones who went to work got some kind of a certificate that they are employed, which was worth nothing, but at that time-- and also they used to-- sometimes in the places they worked, they used to get a kind of a hot soup during the day.

At that time, I wanted very much to go to work. My mother couldn't because she was not well and then she had to take care-- my sister had a little child. Later we got in touch with my sister who was also taken to the ghetto. But her husband was taken away right away. And she remained with a little child. The girl was a few years old. She was born in 1933, so what was she?

About eight or nine.

Eight years old. And so my mother had to take care of her. Some people got employed by the ghetto government as clerks, taking care of the establish--

Was this the Judenrat?

The Judenrat, yes. But most of the people wanted to go out, as I said, for the reasons that they could get something, acquire something. So they didn't like to take women all together to work. But somehow once there came a group of horrible Nazi men, and they said they want young girls to work. So right away I went.

I went, and they took us somewhere to a place where it used to be a military station before the war. And now they were the Germans there. And what they did? They took a few girls and they made us clean up the outhouses was one thing to do.

So I remember very distinctly one girl-- she was such a pretty girl-- and she still had a manicure on her hands. I couldn't believe how she did it, but she had it. And so when she was trying to pick up the dirt, she found a piece of newspaper. And she wanted to take it with the newspaper.

And this German, [SPEAKING GERMAN]. It means you have to get the dirt with your hands. And it was really human feces. So that's what she did. And that was it.

I still kept going there because I somehow felt that I-- and they used to give us a little soup I think.

Were you paid?

No. Nobody was paid.

Just some food.

Yeah. This was slave-- we were slave laborers. But after a couple of weeks working there, a miracle happened. I spoke a very good German also because I took German in school. I told you it helped me.

[? Another ?] German soldier-- maybe he was sergeant. I don't know what he was. But he came to me he says, do you speak German? I said, yes. So what are you doing here? I said, I'm working. I'm a Jewess. He says, I want to take you away from the dogs-- this was his words. And he took me, and he brought me in a little-- how do you call this-- guard house.

I came in, it was warm. There was iron stove and I saw some potatoes in this, and two or three elderly men. And he said-- and he was so nice to me-- he said, what are you doing there? How did you wind up there? I said, why do you ask me these questions? I'm a Jewish girl. What else can I do? He says, no, that's not true. We are not-- they were military men who even didn't know many of the atrocities which the Nazis do around. They were all old soldiers.

So he said, you sit here. The only thing you have to do is to darn the socks. And he says, here is a German magazine [INAUDIBLE]. You can read it while you are doing. Nobody is going to-- I said, how I'm going to come to the ghetto? I'm not allowed to walk. He says, one of us is going to escort you.

And you know what? I remember at the end of the day, they would give me a piece of butter. You know what it means I used to bring a piece of butter for the little child and for the mother? And I said, ma, I am in heaven. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. They couldn't believe it that such a thing happened to me.

And he used to come every morning and wait at the gate. We were not allowed to come. And I would come out and he would go with me. He would even-- you know what he would do? He would walk with me. And I'm just thrilled because he didn't want to humiliate me that I should walk on the street and he on the sidewalk. There were Germans like this also.

He wasn't penalized for it?

No.

You don't know what happened to him.

I don't know-- I know what happened. He went to Stalingrad later and probably got killed. But before that the military had some kind of arrangement that the Gestapo didn't mix in into them. Somehow-- I don't know what it was, I didn't understand. But they had nothing to do with them. And it was for a few months.

And after a few months I come there. And he says to me, I have very bad news for you. I said, what are the bad news? We are going to the front. We are being sent to the front. And I don't know who is going to be in our place, and we can't keep you anymore here.

We did our best. We wanted to keep you as long as possible. But we can't do it anymore. But we want to help you. I said, how can you help me? He says, we will try.

You see there is a military unit in Vilna called [INAUDIBLE]. That's how I came there. And he says, the administrator is a very decent man. I'm going to give you a letter that you know perfect German, and you can help out. And maybe he can find something employment for you. So I know many Jews work there as laborers, but there is no Jewish women. I know there are no Jewish women, but maybe somehow he will find a way to employ you.

Excuse me, Pearl. We have to stop for a few minutes just to change the tape, OK?

OK.