

Gideon Arie, Gidon Arye

RG-50.030.0009

Two video cassettes

In Hebrew

Recorded July 11, 1989

Abstract

Gidon Arye was born in 1928, in Vilna, into an upper middle class family. At the time, approximately one third of Vilna's residents were Jews. He lived with his father, a well connected building contractor and a partner in a carpentry factory, his mother, who was from a large Orthodox family, and a younger brother. He had attended a private, Polish-speaking Jewish school as well as Jewish summer camps, not all of which were Zionist. Until the Germans entered Vilna in June 1941, his family enjoyed a very comfortable way of life. Once the Germans took over Vilna from the Russians, the situation changed dramatically for the worse. Many Jews were rounded up and taken to Ponary where they were killed. Initially, because his father always seemed to have the necessary work permits /licenses, the family was able to manage even after the Jews were evicted from their homes and forced to move into the overcrowded ghetto. As a result of his father's connections, Gidon obtained work inside the ghetto in the carpentry and glass workshop. He joined the Juden Club and eventually the FPO (the underground) and was able to avoid being rounded up during the various aktzias.

The ghetto was liquidated on September 23, 1943. Gidon's mother and brother were taken to Ponary and killed. His father worked in a Jewish work force in the Gestapo building. Gidon managed to escape the roundup and to make his way to the Kailis work camp. Conditions in Kailis were not unduly harsh, but after just barely avoiding being killed in an aktzia, Gidon decided to leave Kailis and to join the partisans. His plans changed when he learned that his father was alive and had been sent to a different work camp on the outskirts of Vilna, known as HKP (Heeres-Kraftfahr-Park [army vehicle repair]). Gidon was able to smuggle himself out of Kailis and into HKP where he worked soldering aluminum. Thereafter, he and his father worked in a factory on the outskirts of Vilna until the city was liberated by the AK [Armia Krajowa], the Polish Home Army. After liberation, an acquaintance of his father from before the war became the manager of the factory. He and his father continued to work at the factory until the war ended. Gidon returned to school for a period of time. He met his then future wife and her mother at the train station in Vilna where people would gather to see who had returned from the war.

In December 1945, he and his father together with his future wife and her mother left Vilna and went to Lodz where Gidon and his wife married. With the assistance of the Bricha, the four of them made their way to Germany where they lived in an UNRRA [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration] camp in Leipheim, Bavaria. They were supposed to go to Israel with the Aliyah Bet but just prior to boarding the ship which was to take them to Israel, they were told that his father and mother-in-law were too old to go with them. Gidon and his wife refused to be separated from their parents. With the help of the Aliyah Bet, all four of them went to Marseilles, France. By that time, Israel had become independent. Shortly after arriving in France, they left to Israel aboard the ship Galila. They were met in Pardes Channa by Gidon's uncle from his mother's side of the family. They were taken to Jerusalem where they settled. Gidon and his wife have three children and five grandchildren. His father and mother-in-law are no longer alive.

- 1:00** My name is Gidon Arye. I was born in the city of Vilna (Vilna or Vilno in Russian, Wilno in Polish, Wilna in German, Vilne in Yiddish, Vilnia in Belorussian, Vil'njus in Ukraine) in 1928. At the time, Vilna, which was called the Jerusalem of Lita, was a "Jewish city." Of its 200,000 residents more than one third were Jews. I lived with my mother and father and younger brother.
- 1:01** Before the war, we were an upper middle class family. My parents spoke Russian to each other but Polish to me.
- 1:02** My mother's extended family was quite Orthodox; she had a sister who was married to a rabbi. My father's family was smaller; he had a sister who lived in Vilna. My father was a building contractor and we had a wonderful life before the war.
- 1:03** When I was a little, a Polish general came to our house. He put me on his lap and told me that when I would get older and finish high school, he would see to it that I would become a Polish officer. That was a huge compliment because Jews were not accepted to officer's school. Until 1939, I attended many youth camps, not all of them were Zionist camps. Before the Russians entered Vilna, the school that I attended, which was called the Ochs school (named for the Ochs family, a daughter still lives in Israel today), was a private Polish speaking Jewish school. All of the students as well as the teachers were Jewish. Once the Russians took over Vilna in 1939, the school changed its name to Peretz after the great writer, and Yiddish became the spoken language at school.
- 1:04** Until the outbreak of the war in 1939, all was well. We had a good life under the Russians. I was only eleven years old at the time and at first I didn't detect much of a difference in our lives, though I realize that it was probably more difficult for my father. Prior to the war, my father was also a partner in a carpentry factory which produced all kinds of wood related products. When the Russians captured Vilna, my father ceased being independent and instead became a technical manager at the factory. From an economic standpoint I did not detect any drastic changes.
- 1:05** Everything was more or less OK until June 22, 1941, when the Germans captured Vilna, Lita, and part of Poland and also entered Russia. That's when the troubles began. By that time I was somewhat older and more mature and had some idea of what was going on.
- 1:06** It's difficult for someone like me who actually experienced the Holocaust to talk about it especially since I was a child at that time. Shortly after the Germans captured Vilna, I felt as if I had entered hell. We didn't detect much during the first few days, but then the **aktzias** (plural for Polish **aktzia**; **aktionen** plural for German **aktion**) began.

The Germans, who were assisted by the Lithuanians, started rounding up men off the streets for work. Initially, the men would return at night but shortly thereafter they simply vanished and we had no idea where they were. The women tried to follow the men so as to ascertain their whereabouts but they would arrive at a certain point and were unable to proceed farther. All

kinds of rumors were circulating. Sometime later we heard about a place called Ponary (Polish) (Paneriai in Lithuanian) which was near Vilna.

- 1:07** I heard about Ponary when I was already in the ghetto. I was a child and I did not know much. My father was lucky he had an “*Ausweis*” for all kinds of things, a work permit, which meant that one could survive because the holder of that document meant that the person was needed.
- 1:08** My father was someone who was still needed. He had many non-Jewish acquaintances and somehow he always had the necessary license, I don’t know how. The yellow ones were the most sought after during the *Aktionen*. Before we were taken to the ghetto, we had lived on a very respectable street, Mickiewicza, it was not in the Jewish neighborhood. We lived in what can be called a condominium.
- 1:09** Eventually, we started being evicted from our homes. We were told to go outside and to take with us whatever we could carry. My mother prepared packages but not of clothing or food. Instead, the package that I was given to carry contained soap, sewing thread and leather for shoe soles. My mother gave me the heaviest package because I was the strongest in the family. My father had always been physically weak and I knew that we had to watch over father, not to make him angry and not to make him lift things. Obviously my mother wasn’t going to be carrying the packages because she was a woman. Later, I realized how smart my mother’s packages were and how smart she was.
- 1:10** We thought that we were going to go to the ghetto but we were taken to prison, Vilna Lukiszki, where more than 10,000 people from the surrounding area had been gathered. We remained there for three days under terrible conditions, with nothing to eat or drink and of course with no water to wash. It was very crowded, we slept standing up. On the third or fourth day, I heard our name being called.
- 1:11** My father had a document in his pocket which indicated that he had built some kind of building for the Polish government. The men had been separated from the women and children. The Germans decided that they still had a need for certain Jewish professionals such as doctors, engineers and technicians. My father had approached the Germans and signed up as a building engineer, and that is how we got out of jail. Everyone else was taken to Ponary. I am speaking about 1941 when we were taken to the ghetto. There was tremendous overcrowding in the ghetto.
- 1:12** Multiple families lived in only one room. The doctors tried to focus attention on hygiene but there was a great deal of overcrowding. People slept on the floor and under the beds. There was a hospital in the ghetto. Teachers were still concerned about educating the children and even set up a school. My mother was afraid to let my brother and me go to school because she thought that the children would be taken from there and sent to their deaths. My father worked outside the ghetto while I worked inside the ghetto.

- 1:13** There were workshops in the ghetto. I worked in the carpentry and glass workshop. My father, through a building engineer acquaintance of his, had been able to arrange for carpentry work for me. The days passed and there was hunger in the ghetto. That's when I realized how smart my mother had been about packing soap, thread and leather for shoe soles. Those items were greatly in demand and as a result we were able to obtain food. At one point I asked my mother how she had known what to pack. She told me that during the First World War when the Germans conquered Poland, those were the items that were in the greatest demand; that is how she knew what we should take with us to the ghetto.
- 1:14** We ate once a day. My mother used the money from what we were able to sell to buy flour, but she did not use the flour to bake bread. Instead, my mother made us cereal; we would get a plate of cereal every morning. I don't know how much my mother ate, I never saw her eat, but my brother and I ate and then I would go to work. I would come home after work and stay home and that is how things went on for awhile until I heard about something called the **Juden Club**. I don't know who organized it or how it got started but I knew that I wanted to go and I did. The Juden Club was a very smart thing.
- 1:15** The youth that were left after the *Aktionen* would get together in the evenings. There were no divisions based on political ideology as had been the case before the war or as exists in various countries today. There was solidarity between the Zionists and the anti-Zionists, the Bund and the Communists, etc. We were all united and our focus was exclusively on one issue: to survive and how to do that. Our discussions were whether to stay in the ghetto, go to the forest, or join the partisans.
- 1:16** We would meet at the Juden Club nearly every evening. Work was hard for us not least because we were young, but we didn't complain. After every aktion we would run to the Juden Club to see who was still left. We would meet in a house in the ghetto where some of the walls had been taken down so that there was a meeting room. We would even be able to get a cup of hot tea, with or without sugar was not important. I don't recall whether there was a formal curfew however, people did not walk around after midnight. Somehow, we were always able to get there.
- 1:17** We heard that there was an underground organization the **FPO (Fareinikte Partisaner Organization, United Partisans Organization)**. We, the youngsters who were 13-14 years old, wanted to join and finally were able to do so. The underground was organized into small groups of five, four youngsters and one commander per group. My commander was the son of a well known teacher in Vilna. I subsequently found out that he died while with the partisans. We could either join the partisans or stay in the ghetto and fight. Our goal was not to allow the Germans to kill us.
- 1:18** That is what we wanted to achieve and that is how we survived from one aktion to the next. Some of the group left and joined the partisans; others were taken in the aktionen that periodically took place. That is how we existed until the "**Grossaktion**" (big action), which

occurred in the summer of 1943, and lasted for three days. They went from house to house and collected all the boys.

- 1:19** I remember the grossaktion very well. In the middle of the night one of the kids from my group of five knocked on our door and told me to that I had to get up and go with him. When I was dressed and just about to leave my mother jumped out of bed. She didn't really know what I was up to but she sensed that I was involved with a group.
- 1:20** She said that if I were saved and managed to survive I should know that we had a large family in Israel which was then Palestine and that I should try to get myself there. All of us youngsters had assembled in one yard where we waited to see what would happen. The Germans and the Lithuanians were going from house to house and from yard to yard until they finally reached the yard where we were gathered. The commander of the Gestapo himself was there, I think that his name was Neugebauer.
- 1:21** When he entered the yard and saw all of us youngsters, I think he became a little nervous. The Germans knew that there were weapons hidden in the ghetto. There was a girl with us, she had a pistol. She wanted to shoot the Gestapo commander but when she tried to fire the gun it jammed. Before the Germans could react a Jewish policeman put himself between the commander and the girl so as to prevent her from being killed. The commander pushed the Jewish policeman away and moved the girl over to the side. He did not do anything to her; he said that he still had a need for her.
- 1:22** That girl is still alive today. I met her a year ago in Chicago when she was visiting her cousin. She told me that I am the sole surviving witness to that incident. She said that over the years she told many people about what had happened but that no one else remembered it. Her name is Lola Gittelson(?); she lives in Leningrad. The Germans had rounded us up. I made an oath to myself that I would not leave Vilna. While I was standing there, I guess that out of irritation I kicked one of the nearby walls.
- 1:23** The stone in the wall that I kicked moved and I saw that there was an opening and then a hole behind it. I crept into the hole, four or five more kids crawled in after me and then we rolled the stone back into place and waited. We didn't know what to do. We decided that we would wait until it got dark and then we would attempt to come out of the hiding place. Meanwhile, we continued to sit there. Later, we heard a knock on the wall. Apparently a girl had seen us enter the hole. She had told one of the older people what she had seen and they in turn told her to wait until dark and then to fetch us and take us somewhere else, which is what she did. That is how we were saved and were able to remain in the ghetto.
- 1:24** We were taken to the "bath house" of the ghetto, which was a gathering place. Abba Kovner was there and also Wittenberg who was still alive at the time. That was where people would gather before going into the forest. We stayed there for awhile. The younger ones among us, like me, were dispersed and sent home. The older ones were sent out to the forest a few at a time. I later learned that many of them had been killed while trying to get to the forest. I went

home and went to work the next morning. The “aktzia” had come to an end. Two weeks before Yom Kippur of 1943, the ghetto of Vilna was liquidated.

- 1:25** The destruction of the Vilna ghetto took place on September 23, 1943. My father had studied at the Veler Gymnasium (?), a German school in Vilna. In Vilna there were Poles and Jews as well as “*Volksdeutsche*.” My father had had a classmate who was German. His name was Haus Leiber. When the Germans took over Vilna, the *Gebietskommissar* gave all the volksdeutsche jobs.
- 1:26** Haus Leiber was in charge of the workshops in the ghetto. My family had not known about that until 1942 around the time of the Jewish holidays. One day while I was at work, a policeman who was one of the guards at the gates of the ghetto, came into the workshop and approached my supervisor. He gave him a note, and then I was called over to the supervisor. I was nervous because being summoned by a guard of the gates of the ghetto is not a good thing. The guard said that I was to go with him. The supervisor was my father’s friend. Before leaving with the guard I asked the supervisor to let my family know what had happened to me in the event that I did not return.
- 1:27** I went with the guard to the gates of the ghetto and along the way I asked him what was going on. He told me that the *Gebietskommissar* wanted to see me. We left the ghetto, because I was wearing my yellow star I walked on the street and the guard on the sidewalk. Jews were not permitted to walk on the sidewalk.
- 1:28** The headquarters of the *Gebietskommissar* was on Mickiewicz Street, where my family had once lived, and the building was the former Bank of Poland. We went into the building and up a few flights of stairs until we arrived in a room. The guard saluted and left. Initially, I didn’t see anyone in the room, but what I saw was a table set for breakfast with lots of food.
- 1:29** Then I saw a man wearing civilian clothes seated in a chair. He asked me in Polish whether I remembered him. It turns out that he had been to our house a few times before the war. I asked him how he had been able to find me, but he told me that I should eat before we talked. Of course I was very hungry so I began to eat but I was very curious.
- 1:30** I couldn’t wait long before I once again asked him how he had been able to locate me. He told me that he was in charge of all of the workshops in the ghetto. He had reviewed the names appearing on the lists of the people who were working in the workshops looking for anyone that he knew. He asked me about my family and their well being, and he wrote down the details of what I told him. He said that he would send for me about once a month. He said that winter was coming and asked whether there was anything that we needed. I really didn’t ask for much, some cabbage, potatoes, and eggs. He said not to worry, it would get to us, and that is what happened. It was a treasure. It only happened once, on the eve of the Jewish holidays in 1942. He was either afraid to do it again or was unable to do so.

- 1:31** I did not see him again until after the war. It happened when I was in Lodz with my father when we were on our way to Israel. My father and I were the only ones from my immediate family to survive the war. We were in the market place when I saw him. The market was where people would meet each other. After our initial meeting, he visited us in Lodz but it was clear that he was scared. He eventually told us that we should not talk about him nor mention his name. He also told us that he was attempting to get out of Europe.
- 1:32** Before the ghetto was liquidated, we already knew that after the Battle of Stalingrad things were not going well for the Germans. We knew this from newspapers that had been stolen, or from listening to the German soldiers talking among themselves, and from the radio. There were some radios in the ghetto; it was enough that one person would hear something for the news to spread. So we knew that the Russians were advancing but we didn't know how long it would take them to reach us.
- 1:33** We lived on the upper floor of a three story building. We were six or seven families in three rooms. One of the people who was living with us had actually lived in that building before the war. He was a carpenter and he had once worked for my father so that when we were taken to the ghetto and he saw us, he suggested that we move into the building where he was living. In any event, one day there was a gathering in the building. I overheard the grownups talking about building a *melina (maline)*, which is a hiding place. They had decided that they were going to build one between two buildings, the one that we were living in and the one directly behind it.
- 1:34** They managed to build it without any problem. The building directly behind the one we were in was actually outside of the ghetto walls. There were bunk beds called *nares (naris)* made out of planks. The *melina* was large enough to hold up to 60 people. The entrance was in the kitchen, to get into it you needed to move half a wall but that wasn't a problem. There was no difficulty getting wood in the ghetto. There was always wood to be had, the bath house was heated with wood, and there were wood workshops.
- 135** When the ghetto was liquidated, the older people among us decided that we should go into the *melina*. But instead of 60 people there were 120 people who went into the *melina*, everyone had a sister or a brother or a close relative, etc. There was enough food to last for one year. Water and electricity were to come from outside the ghetto. I don't know how it was arranged. There was even a bathroom in the Melina. We remained in the *melina* for two weeks.
- 1:36** Before **Yom Kippur**, someone decided that since the holiday was approaching bread, *pletzlech*, should be baked. However, baking means smoke and smoke escapes. Someone outside saw the smoke, but that wasn't what revealed our hiding place. There was one flaw in the building of the hiding place and that was the air hole. It actually wasn't a flaw, but what happened was that someone else had built a hiding place in the area above the air hole. When the Germans were looking for the source of the smoke they discovered the other hiding place.

- 1:37** As that other hiding place was being discovered, one of the soldiers fell face down. He felt that the area underneath him was warm and he suspected something wasn't right. The Germans or the Lithuanians came up with a plan. They threw a pebble down the air hole. I slept in the bunk directly under the air hole so when I heard what they were doing I put a plate underneath the hole so that when the pebble struck the plate it would not seem that there was any depth. Unfortunately however, the people down below started screaming, I don't know why they screamed.
- 1:38** The Germans or the Lithuanian threatened to throw in a grenade unless we came out and we knew that they meant what they said, so we had no choice but to open the entrance and come out. When we came out, one of the people who had been in the house jumped from the top floor of the building and died. There was also a baby that had been born in the ghetto. When the Germans were looking for our hiding place the baby started to cry. The grandmother took a pillow and placed it over the baby and the cries subsided. We were sure that the baby had been smothered to death, but as we were being led away we saw that the baby was still alive.
- 1:39** We were taken to the police station in Vilna and put inside a large room. We were guarded by one Lithuanian. I was the youngest one there. I went over to some of the older boys and suggested that we either bribe the Lithuanian or kill him.
- 1:40** The boys were not prepared to hear what I had to say. They did not believe that they were going to die. I had heard the Germans say that we were going to be taken to the Gestapo building. I told the boy next to me that I was not going to let that happen to me.
- 1:41** I had once done some work in the Gestapo building, and while I personally did not know anyone who had been taken there, I had heard such terrible screaming when I was there that I knew that no one wanted to be taken there. It was around 4:00 PM, I still remember looking at my watch because it was the eve of Yom Kippur. Cars were sent for us, Renaults. I was the last one into one of the cars and I sat next to the door.
- 1:42** Before the cars got underway, I jumped out and hid underneath the car. Someone, a non-Jew, saw me and started pointing me out. I was taken out from under the car, but not beaten. Apparently the reasoning was that we were going to be killed shortly in any event. A guard was posted next to the car and I was made to get back inside. Next to me sat the grandmother with the baby that we had thought had been smothered. The cars started moving. I recall that it was a Friday. Tuesdays and Fridays were market days in Vilna. A non-Jewish woman passed by and she was carrying a large basket.
- 1:43** Suddenly, the grandmother threw the baby into the non-Jew's basket. I don't even know whether the grandmother recognized the non-Jew. In all likelihood, she did not know her. I think that the grandmother also wanted to jump out but instead she partially fell out. The guard turned around and tried to shove her back into the car. At that moment I pushed her together with the guard and jumped out of the car. I started to run and I believe that is why I am alive today, on account of that baby. For all that I know, that child might still be alive.

- 1:44** The cars were already outside of the ghetto when I jumped out and started running. I ran towards Sadova, a street where an aunt had lived, so I knew the area. I briefly turned around and saw that someone was following me on a bicycle. He caught up to me. He was bigger than I was and said that I was a Jew and that I was trying to escape and that therefore he had to take me back to the ghetto. Suddenly, I remembered that before we were taken from our hiding place, my mother told me that she had sewn some gold coins inside my jacket. I said to the boy, you know what, I have some gold coins. I will give them to you if you leave me alone. He agreed, and suggested that we go into the nearby yard. In Vilna all houses had a yard with a gate. As we entered the gate, I pushed him. He fell; I shut the gate and started running.
- 1:45** I continued running until I came to an area which had been the first area in Vilna that was fired upon by the Germans in 1939. There was a destroyed building there where Poles were sitting and doing all kinds of repair work. I walked around a bit and saw the young Pole that had been after me talking with a Lithuanian policeman. They were pointing at me. I didn't have much time to think. I jumped into a pile of rubble and tried to hide. The other Poles had seen what was going on but their hatred of the Lithuanians was so great that they would not cooperate with them, even over a Jew.
- 1:46** The Lithuanian policeman asked the Poles if they had seen a Jew running away. I had removed the Jewish Star from my clothing. They said that they hadn't seen anyone. I didn't trust them so I remained in my hiding place until the evening when it started to get dark and the Poles went home. That is when I came out of the rubble and had to decide where to go. I knew that outside of the Vilna ghetto there were two camps: Kailis (Keilis) and HKP (*Heeres-Kraftfahr-Park*).
- 1:47** In Kailis, Jews were sewing furs for the German army. There were approximately 1,000 families in Kailis, about 50 people were furriers the rest were from the surrounding areas. There is an interesting story about Kailis. It was supposedly started by a German officer who was himself a Jew, to help other Jews. I do not know the details of the story. In any event, I decided to go to Kailis because I did not think that I knew anyone in HKP, though it turned out that I knew people there as well. In Kailis, I knew one of the leaders and I also knew of a man who was a close friend of my father, the uncle of Lola Gittleson, the woman whom I had visited in Chicago. But it wasn't an easy matter to get into Kailis, it was a closed place especially after the work day was over, you could not just walk in.
- 1:48** I knew more or less where Kailis was, and I started to walk in that direction. As I was walking, a young boy approached me. I was 15; he must have been about 8 years old. He said to me I'll walk on one side of the street and you walk on the other side, and I will show you where the Jews are. And that is what we did.
- 1:49** When I started to see the outskirts of Kailis, the boy came over to my side of the street and told me to be careful because there were many Lithuanian police hanging about.

He was standing behind me as we spoke. When I turned around to thank him, he was gone. I never understood that incident with the boy. That was a miracle from heaven. As I approached the gate I saw someone I knew, he was a Jewish policeman. He was from the ghetto, too, but had run away. Luckily for him he had a brother in Kailis who took him in which made him "legal" so to say.

- 1:50** My friend saw me approaching and tried to signal to me not to approach directly through the center gate but to go around to the side, but I didn't understand what he was trying to tell me. I entered through the gate. There were indeed many Lithuanian police who were dressed in civilian clothes. They saw me enter and knew that I didn't belong there. As I was entering, I heard Yiddish being spoken from a room that had a window facing outwards towards the gate. I went in through the window. I looked around and saw a group of Jews sitting and eating.
- 1:51** It was the eve of Yom Kippur. Seeing Jews eating on the eve of Yom Kippur was very strange to me. I had not seen anything like that in years. In Kailis nothing was lacking, they had everything. Some people had to work but others had everything. The people in the room knew that I had run away from the ghetto and that I was there to see a man named Kravchensky, the person who had been my father's friend. I could tell by their expression that Kravchensky was not there. At that time, one could assess a situation just from an expression. So I asked for Gittleson. They told me that Gittleson was not there at that moment because he was working but would soon return. They offered to take me to him.
- 1:52** Gittleson lived in a three room apartment; each room was occupied by more than one family. The Gittleson family consisted of four brothers and their wives as well as a mother. I was lucky. Gittleson also had a wife and daughter but they were not living in the ghetto. They were in hiding outside of the ghetto in a textile factory as a result of an arrangement that had been worked out by one of the secretaries of the textile factory that Gittleson owned.
- 1:53** When Gittleson saw me he told me not to worry. He said that his daughter's name was Mira and that he would write me down in her place as Mirek. And that is how in just a few hours, I became completely "legal." There was no place for me to sleep but there was a kitchenette that had a door. At night the door would be taken down and I slept on that door which was placed on top of two stools or on the floor and that is how I slept together with one other person who was also a friend of mine. We became friends as a result of our common troubles, today he lives in **kibbutz** Afikim. We lived that way from Yom Kippur until **Pesach** (Passover).
- 1:54** Before Passover, a big *aktzia* took place. The Germans rounded up all the children up to the age of 16. It was known as a **kinderaktzia**. It was a fact that was known not only in Vilna, but all over Poland and I think throughout Europe as well, that at that time the Germans needed blood for the wounded German soldiers. The Germans thought that blood from children up to the age of 16 was good clean blood. A child from whom all the blood had been removed would get up from the bed, fall and die. We didn't know what to make of it.

The Germans took all the kids, including me. At the last second, the SS commander whose nickname was **Golosheyka**, I guess because he had a long neck, came over to me and to a girl who is no longer alive today.

- 1:55** The girl and I were told to go back to the apartments. I don't know why but that's what happened. I was lucky. But I decided that this was no longer the place for me and that I had to go somewhere else. I did not know how or where to go. I thought that perhaps I should go to the forests and join the partisans.

END OF TAPE I

- 2:00** Kailis had been like a rest house for me, I had what to eat and a place to sleep.

- 2:01** I did not know with certainty what had happened to my family. I assumed that all of them had been killed because once they were in the hands of the Gestapo they would have been sent to Ponary and everyone knew what fate awaited them there. After the kinderaktzia in Kailis, I decided that the time had come for me to try and escape from there because I had concluded that like the ghetto, Kailis too would be liquidated, and therefore I should somehow try to get myself to the forests and join up with the partisans.

- 2:02** However, to get to the forests wasn't so simple. I knew that every few weeks a so called priest together with a blond girl would come to Kailis. I later learned that the priest wasn't a priest and the blond girl was a Jew and that they had contacts of sorts with the partisans. The girl is still alive today and lives in Tel Aviv. I wasn't sure about how to make contact with them, but one thing that I knew with certainty was that I would need to have a gun and that if I didn't have one I would have to buy one. I didn't know how much a gun would cost but I still had some gold coins inside my jacket.

- 2:03** I found a way to make contact with the partisans and I was set to go to the forest. In fact, Gittleson, who had been like a father to me, had stolen some furs from the workshop and made me a warm jacket so that I would have some protection from the elements because I did not have warm clothing. One day after work when we were walking in the yard, I saw a young Polish boy; I knew that he was the meter reader. The Germans, lovers of order, would send a meter reader to all the camps to obtain a reading regarding how much electricity was being used. The meter reader would show up about once a month but I never paid any attention to him.

- 2:04** As he was doing his meter reading I heard him asking around if anyone had seen a fellow by the name of Gutek. In Vilna I had been called Gutek. I realized that he was probably looking for me but I was afraid to approach him. Just as he was getting ready to leave I went over to him and said that I heard that he was looking for someone, and that I was wondering who it might be. He said Gutek. I asked him if he knew the family name of the Gutek person and he said Arye, and asked me if I knew him. I told him that I did, that I think that I had met someone with that

name and I asked him why he was looking for Gutek. He said that he wanted to talk with him to tell him that his father was alive.

- 2:05** At that point in the conversation I told him that I was Gutek. While he had not recognized me, he was surprised that I did not recognize him. It turns out that before the war, as a boy, he had worked for my father for awhile, and through my father's intervention was able to study to become an electrician and get a job with the municipality. He proceeded to tell me what he had heard from my father regarding how my father had managed to remain alive. There was a group of Jews that had been working in the Gestapo building doing all kinds of jobs. The person who was in charge of them was a man by the name of Kamenmacher. He had been my father's friend at one time.
- 2:06** When Kamenmacher saw that my father was among the people that had been brought by the Gestapo from the ghetto, he approached one of the Germans and told them that he needed my father to do a job for him. In order to avoid suspicion he told the German that he also needed two additional workers. So, instead of going to Ponary, my father was taken to the Gestapo building; the others were taken to Ponary. A few hours later the cars from Ponary returned. The clothes of those who had been taken to Ponary, including those of my mother and brother, were in the cars. That is how I know the memorial day for my mother and brother, which is on the eve of Yom Kippur.
- 2:07** When the Gestapo began to cut back on the Jewish work force, the workers, one of whom was my father, were sent to HKP. My father suspected that I might still be alive because he had seen me jump out of the car and he assumed that I would try to find a place to hide out, which in his mind meant that I would try to make my way to one of the camps. When the Polish meter reader came to HKP, my father recognized him and asked him to inquire about my whereabouts as he made his rounds. That is how the contact between my father and I came about. Once that happened I decided to find a way to be with my father instead of joining the partisans. One day, in the summer of 1944, I found the opportunity that I needed. All kinds of tradesmen from the towns surrounding Vilna were brought to Kailis, for example, glassmakers and other tradesmen.
- 2:08** Whether those people were really the tradesmen that they claimed to be is a different issue. At that time, a piano teacher might say that he was a carpenter, I in fact knew someone who did exactly that. In any event, it seems that a mistake had been made. Those tradesmen should have been sent to HKP where people were needed to do all kinds of work such as repairing cars, which was not the kind of work that was being done in Kailis. After a few days, I heard that the tradesmen would be moved to HKP, which was the opportunity that I needed to get myself out of Kailis. I stood in the yard and watched the system. The name of the male who was the head of a household would be called out, such as for example, Levin plus three, which meant Levin, his wife and their two kids. I heard them call out Avram Avromich plus three, but only two people came forward in response so I quickly joined with them without thinking much about it and that is how I got out of Kailis and into HKP.

- 2:09** My father had not known that I would be arriving in HKP. HKP was a divided camp, some people worked in workshops (military vehicle repair) outside of the main camp which was the case with my father. When I arrived, my father was not in the main camp, he was at a place where the Polish army had housing for soldiers. Word was sent to him and that is how he knew that I had arrived. On Sundays, there would be a roll call. On the first Sunday that I was in HKP, when I turned out for the roll call, a German officer approached me and said that he had seen me in Kailis, and what was I doing in HKP.
- 2:10** Today, when I do not tell the truth I immediately turn red but at that time, I can't explain how, I looked the officer straight in the eye without turning red and made as if he had not spoken to me. This happened about four times over the space of a few weeks. I made up my mind that if it would happen again I would have to escape from HKP. For some reason, the German officer gave up and did not pursue the issue with me again. Maybe, he thought that he had made a mistake and that I had died in Kailis so I could not possibly be in HKP. He was the same officer who had saved me during the *kinderaktzia* in Kailis. In HKP, conditions were not as good as they had been in Kailis. HKP had been established much later, after the Jews who were sent there had already experienced the seven gates of hell in the ghetto.
- 2:11** In HKP, the Jews knew what the Germans were capable of doing. In Kailis, they thought that without them the Germans would lose the war. In HKP no one was under that illusion; their only thought was how to survive. In HKP, more so than in Kailis, the prisoners were more aware of the situation at the front. There was contact with the **Wehrmacht**. When I was sent out to work in HKP for the first time, I was standing at roll call and an elderly German man (a non-Jew) approached me. There were German trades people who were sent to work at HKP too. Perhaps I reminded him of someone, a son, a relative, or perhaps it was my age, in any event he selected me to work for him.
- 2:12** He was in charge of a workshop that did soldering of aluminum; he was a merciful boss. Anyone who has worked with aluminum knows how difficult soldering can be, but he could do it with his eyes closed. He told me to try and learn the craft well because if I were to live it would be very useful. In the summer I would go out with him with a cart to do the work and in the winter he would keep me in his shop which meant that I did not have to be out in the cold and rain.
- 2:13** He was a very nice man. He was quite old at that time. Another thing that he would do for me was that he would send me to bring him his meals from the kitchen which meant that I had access to some of his food. There was hunger in HKP at that time. He didn't care if I ate some of the food that was supposed to be for him. He would also send me to get him a newspaper so I was able to follow the progress of the war. I knew that the Russians were nearly at Minsk and that liberation was imminent. At the time, an aktzia took place in HKP. I had not experienced one for a long while. Men were being rounded up to work with coal.
-

- 2:14** The work was very difficult. There was a shortage of benzene so there wasn't any benzene available for cars. Instead, coal was used and that's why men were being rounded up to work with coal. I had a feeling that my father and I should try and stay in the back of the line, maybe by waiting something would happen and we would end up better off, and that is what we did. Luckily, when it came to our turn, the quota of workers had been filled and we were sent back to where we were being housed.
- 2:15** The summer had begun. The Germans knew things were not going well for them. The old German for whom I worked was very nervous. He was afraid that he would be sent away. Usually, on Sundays, we did not work the way we did during the week. Sundays were used for making all kinds of arrangements, such as getting shoes repaired and things like that.
- 2:16** One Sunday morning we were sent to the main part of the camp which was in Vilna. We heard an announcement on the loud speaker that whoever wanted butter and jam should go to a truck that was giving it out. I thought that was a bad sign. Given that there was hunger why were they distributing food? Instead of going to get the food as most of the other people were doing, I made my bed and climbed into it. My father was very puzzled and didn't understand what was going on with me. He asked me why we were not going to get the food like the others. My father was very much like that; he thought that what others did was right, that they knew more and better than he did.
- 2:17** My father kept after me to go and get the food but I told him that I was not moving from the bed and that I was not interested in what the others were doing. A second announcement was made, that people would be taken to Kovno. My father said that we should go too and he began to cry. I had never seen my father cry before but I told him that I did not want to go, that if I were to die I would prefer to die in Vilna and that I was not going anyplace.
- 2:18** My father and I were living with another family. There was a father, a mother, a married son and his wife and a little girl. The grandfather managed to smuggle the little girl out of Vilna in a sack. His job involved working in a warehouse. When he saw that I had refused to get out of bed, he came over to me and asked me in Yiddish if I wanted to go to a melina. I said yes. I got dressed and my father and I went with him.
- 2:19** There were 27 of us in the melina. There wasn't enough room, I was the last one in so I sat at the upper most rung of the ladder. We stayed there for three days. We heard all kinds of screaming going on outside. The Germans did not search the warehouse, since it was their warehouse it didn't occur to them that there may be a hiding place in there. On the third night we heard shots and the sound of running. A Jew who was in the melina kept asking where he had left his coat. I understood that he probably had money hidden in his coat, at the time there were still people who had money.
- 2:20** His name was Perlov. His wife, who survived the war, passed away a few years ago in Tel Aviv. I asked him why he was screaming about his coat. He said that he had an idea. He would go outside and create a diversion while the rest of us could try to scatter. I didn't want him to go

because I thought that he would get smacked once or twice and would reveal our hiding place. But he used force and went outside. He didn't last long. A few seconds after he went out we heard shots and we knew that he had been killed. We did not know whether he had revealed our hiding place.

- 2:21** I took the initiative and said that in all likelihood the Germans knew where we were hiding and that we would have to leave in the morning. The day before we had heard some screams in Polish. We knew that the Germans had allowed Poles to come into the area and to take what they wanted. Our plan was to pretend that we were Poles and act as if we were searching around to take what we wanted like the Poles were doing. In that manner we would be able to get out of the area just as the Poles were doing, taking what they wanted and then leaving. And that is what we did. This happened in July of 1944.
- 2:22** This took place a few days before Vilna was liberated by the Russians. There were no more Germans or Lithuanians. The **gendarmierie (gendarmery)** were patrolling on horseback. When they would see someone on the street they would ask for identification. It made no difference if the person was a Jew or not, if they were unable to show identification, they were shot on the spot.
- 2:23** We of course did not have any papers. We started to make our way out of the city. My father had an old friend who lived on Trotsky Street. We decided that we would go to his house. But in the yard we saw some men from the Gestapo. Initially we were afraid but they were not looking for Jews they wanted Polish men who were willing to dig, I thought that we could start out working with the Poles and then we would leave, so we joined up with the Poles. When the quota of workers was filled we were told that we could go. We were not sure where to go, my father's friend was very nervous about having us around.
- 2:24** My father recalled that he once had an employee, a carpenter who lived in Suboch (Polish), which was near HKP but somewhat farther away. We started to walk in that direction and arrived about an hour later. The carpenter hid us in the fields, in a place where potatoes would be stored in the winter. He had greeted us nicely and brought us some black bread, milk and cheese.
- 2:25** We sat and ate, we were very hungry. In the evening he told us that we could not stay in the field at night and that he would take us to the factory where my father had once been a partner. There was an old guard at the factory. He greeted us nicely and gave us a change of clothing. We stayed for about a week, his wife cooked for us every day. We were able to watch the battles that were going on in Vilna.
- 2:26** I had a friend with me from HKP. He had joined up with us when we were trying to get out of Vilna. He survived the war and is living in Israel. We stayed in the factory until Vilna was liberated. Unfortunately, the part of Vilna where we were located was liberated by the Polish partisans, they were called **AK**. They were big anti-Semites; they were better able to distinguish

between Jews and regular Poles than the Germans. Luckily for us, an older man, a non-Jew, approached me.

- 2:27** He told me that my father and I should remain indoors, that we should not go outside on that particular day. At first, I didn't know why he told me that. Later that day, the Russian commander rounded up all the members of the AK and had them killed or sent to Siberia. There were three liberation forces in Vilna at the time. The Russians, the AK, which was a completely Polish partisan group and the regular partisans among them were Jews as well as Poles.
- 2:28** And that is how we came to be liberated, it was a very sad liberation for us, out of 70-80,000 people there were barely 100 left, and we were afraid to go back to our homes.
- 2:29** We were actually liberated by the Poles while we were in the factory, in the little room where we were staying. At the time the war was still going on, this was in 1944, the war didn't end until May 1945. After we were liberated, many of the partisans, Poles and Jews, joined the Russian army.
- 2:30** When we were liberated, we did not know what to do with ourselves. There was hunger in the city, and we did not have any money, not that there was much to buy even if we would have had money. We decided that we would stay in the factory. My father and I had no one left, my mother and brother had died earlier on and we had no place to go.
- 2:31** During that time, before the war ended, while we were in the factory, someone my father had known before the war, became the manager of the factory. In 1939, a young man had married a girl from Vilna (they were both Jewish). The wife's father had asked my father to give the young man a job, which he did. This same young man became a commander of the partisans during the war and as such he had certain privileges. Once we were liberated, he became the manager of the factory where we were staying. He is still alive today and lives in Ramat Gan. The wife became a surrogate mother to me. Among other things, she mended my clothes and ironed them and she invited us for Shabbat meals.
- 2:32** I continued to work at the factory with my father until the end of the war. However, before the war ended, I decided that the time had come for me to learn something. I walked past my former school one day and noticed that there were lights on in the building. I went inside and was told that classes were being held at night and that anyone could register. Unfortunately, I did not have any paperwork to prove that I had once studied there. The next day, I went to the office of administration but no one was prepared to help me.
- 2:33** Finally, I found one of my old teachers; he was the one and only remaining Jewish teacher in the school. He had taught math and he remembered me. He told me to return the next day and that he would take care of all the procedures so that I could start school, which is what I did. I was the only Jewish student at the school. Before the war, the school had been a Jewish school in its entirety.
-

- 2:34** I returned to school and did relatively well. I continued to progress. When the war ended in 1945, the Jews started returning to Vilna. Everyone would go to the train station to see who was returning. That is where we would meet, at the train station in Zavalna. One day, I met a mother and daughter, the mother recognized me, we had been neighbors. I began to visit with them.
- 2:35** They lived near the big synagogue in Zavalna. I told them that my father and I were leaving Vilna, that we would be going to Palestine, and would they care to join us. They agreed. My father and I had registered as Polish citizens which enabled us to leave Vilna. In December 1945, all four of us left Vilna to go to Poland.
- 2:36** We arrived in Lodz where the daughter and I got married, we are still married and her Hebrew name is Yocheved. Vilna, until 1939, belonged to Poland. My father and I were born in Vilna and therefore we were Polish citizens. Russia captured Vilna in 1939. In 1940, Russia gave Vilna to Lithuania and it became Lithuania's capital.
- 2:37** From Lodz we went to Germany where we remained for three years. We had to cross a number of borders which is a separate story unto itself. We were able to cross from Vilna to Lodz legally on account of our Polish citizenship. From Lodz to Germany we were assisted by the **Bricha**. There were only two possible places where we could go, Italy or Germany. We were sent by the Bricha to Germany.
- 2:38** The young man who had taken over the factory in Vilna was the one who helped us make the connection with the Bricha. He arranged for us to get to Germany as Greek Jewish citizens. As Greek Jewish citizens we were legally able to cross borders.
- 2:39** I am talking about the period 1945-1946, when many people in Europe were on the move, trying to get back to their homes or away from their homes. It was a time when it was easy to lie. We had a number of problematic encounters. One such encounter was in Czechoslovakia. The Czechs were very nice to the Jews. When they heard that a group of Greek Jews were coming, they arranged for the Greek consul to meet us. Unfortunately, not one of us knew a word of Greek. But the consul was sympathetic and when he met us and understood the situation he turned a blind eye. He proceeded to bless each one of us and then went home. Had things not worked out, we could have ended up in jail.
- 2:40** When we arrived in Germany, we stayed in an **UNRRA** camp in Leipheim which was in Bavaria. My wife completed her nursing studies. I also studied a number of different things such as building engineering but I did not complete my studies. At that time we received our authorization to go to Israel. When I arrived in Israel there was a military service draft called the **Machal** (Hebrew - Mitnadvei Hutz La'aretz – volunteers from outside the land of Israel) and **Gachal** (Hebrew - Giyus Chutz La'aretz- overseas recruits).
- 2:41** I had not been a Zionist before the war, though my mother came from a Zionist home. I recall that my father had spoken about a man named Grossman; I think he was a Revisionist. We

never spoke about politics at home. We were supposed to go to Israel on the **Aliyah Bet** (a code name given to illegal immigration by Jews to the British mandate of Palestine in violation of the British White Paper in the years 1934-1948), but at the time the incident with the **Exodus** took place. We were in that group but before we were to board the vessel, we were told that my father and my wife's mother were too old to go with us. My wife and I decided that we would not go without them. My wife felt that if the Germans had not succeeded in separating her from her mother she was not about to let Jews separate them.

- 2:42** We remained in Germany for a few more months until we were taken to France with the Aliyah Bet. When we got to France our troubles were over. By that time Israel had already declared its independence. In France, we lived near Marseilles. We didn't know French and the French refused to speak German. A similar thing happened when we were in Czechoslovakia. The Czechs refused to speak German. In fact, we were told not to speak Yiddish because the Czechs might think that it was German and would throw us off the trains.
- 2:43** We stayed in France only for a short while. By that time the arrangements regarding travel were much more organized, relatively speaking. We left France on the ship called the Galila. We were at sea for about a week, I was very sick the whole time. We arrived in Haifa in November 1948.
- 2:44** Just prior to arriving in Haifa the people turned to look at the city. But they had made a mistake and were facing the wrong way. Instead of Haifa, they were looking at Akko, which was a very disappointing sight, there wasn't much there at the time. They were then told to turn around and look the other way, which is when we saw Haifa. No one was waiting for us even though I had a large family that had settled in Israel before the war. We were taken by bus to Pardes Channa. The first thing that my father did when we arrived in Pardes Channa was to call my uncle, a brother to my mother. He had made aliyah in 1935 and my father knew him because in 1935 my father was already married to my mother.
- 2:45** We had actually made contact with my uncle when we were still in Germany but we had received a very strange letter from him in reply to a letter that we had sent letting him know that we were coming to Israel. I later understood what he had been driving at but at the time I wasn't sure how we would be received by the family in Israel. He had written that he was very sorry to have learned what happened to us and to our family and that he had heard that we were planning on making aliyah. He said that it might be advisable to go to the US first to rest from our experiences. Those were his exact words, to rest. At the time things were hard in Israel. There wasn't much of anything, food was scarce and life in Jerusalem, which is where they lived, was difficult. I did not know that at the time and I thought that they did not want us to come. I responded to that letter and told them that we were coming.
- 2:46** When my father called them from Pardes Channa it was a Thursday. I had made up my mind that if they did not come by Sunday, I would go register for work in Pardes Channa. It was fruit picking season and I would go out to work to earn some money and then we would decide

where to settle. But I didn't have to do that. On Friday my uncle came to Pardes Channa with his son in-law who was a rich man in Israel at that time. His name was Friedman, the same Friedman who was in the oven business. My wife and I went back with them to Jerusalem. Our parents decided to remain in Pardes Channa for a few days to await our luggage from the ship.

- 2:47** We stopped in Tel Aviv to have some lunch because we were told that there wasn't much food in Jerusalem. After what we had gone through we were not at all concerned. My relatives received us very nicely. We, my wife and I together with our parents, lived with my uncle in their small three room apartment for a few months until they were able to find us our own apartment which is where we had our first child.
- 2:48** Our parents lived with us until they passed away. My father died 11 years ago and my mother in law died six years ago. We have three children, two sons and a daughter, two are married.
- 2:49** We have five grandchildren; the oldest became a **bar mitzvah** a few months ago. I see things as the closing of a circle. I lived in Vilna, which in its time was known as the Jerusalem of Lithuania, and now we are living in Jerusalem, in Israel. I also believe that I fulfilled my mother's will in that she had told me all those years ago that if I were to survive, I should make my way to Palestine.
- 2:50** I can also say that I hope that nothing like what happened to us should ever happen again to anyone. I feel an obligation to tell and retell what happened to future generations that they should know and remember what happened to the Jewish people during those years.
- 2:51** I have nothing further to say.
-