

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

**Interview with Samuel Makower
June 15, 1998
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Samuel Makower, conducted by Randy Goldman on June 15, 1998 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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SAMUEL MAKOWER
June 15, 1998

Q: For the record, I would like you to state your name, your date of birth, and where you were born.

A: My name is Samuel Makower, born Smuel Makower. This is a [indecipherable]. I was born January the sixth, 1922 in Shasnich. This is a city in Poland, north of Poland, near the Prussian border.

Q: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your life before the war, your family, your town.

A: The town was a little, typical shtetl. The -- although the majority of the people were Poles, and there were about eight to 9,000 population, and about -- over two thou -- 2500 Jews. The -- I was born to a family le -- relatively large family, we were nine children, and my father was a business man. Went -- finish public school, and after that I went to a Jewish high school which was in Lubuc, a city about 20 miles away from a -- from our -- from Shasnich. And I was here a student till the war started. The war started, I still remember, Friday, 1939, and we heard immediately the thundering of the cannons. And all Jews left the city next day, Saturday. Went south, to relatives.

Q: Okay. I need to stop you here, because I still want to know a little bit more about your -- your life before the war. You mentioned that there was a -- for the population there was a f -- a fairly substantial Jewish community. Was -- was it integrated into the Polish community, or were most of your contacts Jewish?

A: Most of the contacts were Jewish. As a matter of fact, I did not practically know any Polish people, except neighbors who were close by. But to plays, I used to play with the Jewish children, and one started life a -- in -- as a child in goldstu, in elderidge, and Haider, and then -- and school started in the morning, school, and after that you go to a Jewish school all day long, all the years. And when there was no Haider, because I was relatively good student, and I passed fast everything, then I wa -- I was invited by people to -- to read Talmud, to learn more with them in -- without charge. They wanted me because I was a good student, so they wanted with their son -- that I learn with -- with their son. So, till the evening -- the evening th -- I came home, made the lessons, went to sleep. Next day the same thing.

Q: Was there any anti-Semitism in the town?

A: Not that -- there was anti-Semitism, no -- no doubt about it. Th-the Haider where I went to was near the church, so whenever it was some kind of a holiday, we were the killer of God. And -- especially on certain holidays when I had to go around the long way home because there was a procession, and in -- in the short way, and I knew that I will be beaten up if I'll go there. So there was no -- no doubt. But often fights between Jewish children, and -- and Polish children.

Q: The Jewish community wa -- did you -- do you remember having a sort of active cultural life?

A: Oh yes, there was a Jewish library, and all kind of Zionist lectures, and -- and we went -- we were exposed as young children already, to go, everybody want to -- hey, we'll go -- we'll try to go to -- to Israel. And when I chose to go to a Jewish high school, they definitely -- it was -- it was a Zionist no -- s -- a-admira -- at-atmosphere. And learning Hebrew, and Jewish history, a-and ne -- I een -- Hebrew language, and I -- I was supposed to read every week a book in Hebrew. One in Hebrew -- I mean, one in Polish. So -- but it was a Jewish culture, definitely.

Q: And you were part of some of these youth organizations?

A: I started to go to a Hashamiratzaire, for various reasons. One is this is the only place where -- where I -- we could play ping pong, and this kind of thing. As children we were -- we were -- this was influential, playing together, and -- but in -- dreaming one day to go to Israel. And in the matter of fact, my f -- my sister went, before the war to Israel. Before the war started.

Q: Of course, part of the reason I ask this is that you later on, and -- were very active with the partisans, and I just wondered if -- if any of this came from kind of your life, or your ideology before the war.

A: No. This was a -- in the partisan it was simply because a -- as a way of -- to survive, and to take reveng -- revenge.

Q: Okay. We'll get to that. I'm just trying to establish what your -- your life was like before the war. How much did you know about what was already going on in Germany and Austria? And Hitler?

A: We knew that there was a ge -- there were ghettos, and something was going on it's bad for Jews. But we did not know much. Cause -- because later we knew what was going on till '39, because there were Jew -- papers, so we -- so we knew that Hitler is anti-Semite -- Semitic, and there are certain concentration camps, but at that time, nobody spoke about mass destruction somewhere, or -- or -- or killings.

Q: And you probably didn't think that that would affect you?

A: No, till -- till the -- when the war started, yes, we wonder -- this is why when -- I try to go toward -- toward Warsaw when the war started, because I thought I -- maybe there will be a fight, and I'll not be on the side with the Germans, but I'll be in the -- where the pol - - Polish are, and -- but unfortunately on their way, the Germans went faster toward -- came faster toward -- to Warsaw, to -- practically to -- see, they didn't take Warsaw, but

close to Warsaw, so that I was under the Germans, and -- and decided to go back to our city. When I came to our city, was about a few days, the commander of the city, a German -- the German, told all Jews to come out one day. It was about the 15th about -- of -- of -- of September, and put all the Jews in trucks and took them out towards the Russian border. Left us in a place where the Polish army used to exercise. The next morning they came again, and told us to walk toward the Russians. And we walked over there, and they took away everything what we had -- what we still had, if they saw anything valuable. Like, my father forgot to hide his golden watch what he had from his father, they took it away. And I still remember to -- today the first Russian soldier we saw. And while the German were talking to us in such a derogative way, he was so nice, and said something, and I didn't understand a word what he said. My father understood Russian because as a child, Shasnich was under the Russian, and he learned Russian. So he said, "Oh, he told us to go over there, where there is soup for us." Alright, we went there -- the Jewish population of this small place me -- prepared soup -- soup for us. For we ate something warm, and after that they took us to Bialystok.

Q: Couple questions. First, I'm sort of curious why the Germans pushed you toward Russian territory rather than just taking care of you themselves, and the other thing I want you talk a little bit about is kind of the general kind of mood, what it -- what this all felt like.

A: As a whole, we were scared all the time, because we did not -- we knew that they hate Jews, as a matter of fact, they -- this is why they took all the Jews and send them out, because they said that our city will be incorporated in the -- in the Reich, and they did not want to have Jews, the addition of Jews in the -- in the Reich, so they said -- told us to go. And from the Russian point of view it was very nice [indecipherable] let us come in, as a matter of fact, for approximately two months, it -- borders were opening, everybody who came, who could -- who took advantage, and came -- and came, survived. More Polish Jews survived after that in Russia than in Poland. The mood was of unknown. We don't know what expects us. We know that after that -- after [indecipherable] already in Bialystok that we are free to do various things, that nobody persecute us as Jew. If there is something, a lack of certain things, because we saw how eagerly the Jewish -- Russian soldiers is buying various things on the market. [indecipherable] So it is because everybody -- or nobody has enough, but not because we were Jews. So from this point of view I felt a -- it was good and we thanked the -- the German officer did not like to have Jews in his -- in [indecipherable] in the -- in the matter of fact, in comparison is all the cities around Shasnich, more Jews survived Shasnich than all the -- in the cities around it, because they were completely destroyed.

Q: Were you with your family -- were you with your family? Who was with you at this point?

A: At this -- at that place, we were -- had part of the family, two -- I -- one -- my youngest brother and sister stayed with -- with aunts in another city, because it was near where they stayed when my -- when my -- our family left Shasnich the next day after the war, they stayed there because we did not know what will happen to us. I went with my older

brother, further, and we came back, so we were -- and my -- my older sister, Anya, she was -- she worked in Warsaw. And when Warsaw was taken, she came back to Shasnich, and she was told that all the Jews were send away, so she didn't know where to go, she went to the -- my aunt in -- i -- where my brother -- younger brother and sister were. And they -- she organized here a group of people she knew, and they all went also to the rush - - toward the Russian border. She asked my aunt and cousins to go with them, and they said no, they are business people, what do they do in Russia? They didn't know -- they were afraid of Russia. And nobody survived, them. And my sister came -- as a matter of fact, I wanted to go back to bring my sister, and my father told me, "No, I don't have -- I'm missing two daughters and -- and -- and a -- and a son, I don't want to be -- to miss another son." He didn't let me. So every day I was going in Bialystok to the train station, waiting, watching, maybe my sister will come. And sure enough one day I saw a group and she was here, this is my younger sister, and she -- she came. We lived in Bialystok in a -- in one room, four or five families. Everybody had a corner, and sleeping on the -- on the floor, so many people were in the city, because the city of say like 100,000 had a -- had about 150,000 foreigners [indecipherable] who came in. There was no old schools, or -- synagogues were taken up by people as -- we slept on the floors. And one day there were -- came also a couple of guys, and it was my brother-in-law, and they started to like each other, my sister and my -- and my future brother-in-law, who came from Warsaw, also, to -- told -- went over to Russia. And we signed up -- there were always so-called -- we called them byersgame, and they were looking for people to work somewhere deep in Russia, and they were taking the people there to work. We said, we have nothing to lose, we don't have what -- we will sign up -- we didn't know where to -- and we signed up to go to work in Russia. They took us to a construction place. We drove for about a week on the railroad, deep into the Ural mountains. We came there, it was middle -- it was October, and I remember it was such a storm that from the railroad to the building to go down, was about 500 yard. We were running, and most of the people ended up this short pla -- walk, or run, to have frozen nose, frozen ears, because it was minus 40 something.

Q: Let me stop you for a moment. And that was all organized for you?

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay. How long were you in Bialystok, and what -- was there any normalcy to life there?

A: Well we getting soup here, soup there, and the question was how to survive, and everything -- by trying to get something. Jewish -- the Je -- Jewish population organized help for the various people who came from all over Poland. And I don't know if I -- exactly how the organization worked, but from our point of view they we -- we were relying on getting somewhere, something to eat, in order to survive. So we were looking for a place to -- to go to live permanently. Here and there, you heard, people did go into Russia, and they came back, because they say oh, it is such a poor life the -- there is -- the people don't had no -- you don't have stores open where you can buy things, and so on. And as a matter of fact, there were some people who decided maybe they'll go back to

the German -- to where the German is -- to the Jew -- home [inaudible]. And after that, Stalin use all these lists of people who s -- wanted to go back, and send them all to Siberia. And thanks to that, they survived, because the local population up there were -- was killed in '40 -- '41 - '42.

Q: Your treatm -- your treatment by the Russian authorities, or the Soviet authorities in Bialystok was --

A: Oh, it was good, but they did not -- they probably supplied the food for the various organization to feed us. But on the whole, what I saw later, that Russia suffered from a lack of food, in spite of the fact they ha -- they had Ukrainia, which ha -- ga -- which has the -- had the best land in -- in Europe. So -- but this was -- I have ler -- later learned, was the illness of Russia, the -- the collectives. Cohoss what they called, they did not produce enough food. So the attitude was good, but they did not have.

Q: So, you stayed in Bialystok for how long?

A: For about two months, or three months maximally, and -- but -- because late of the year, toward the end of the year, we came to Rockitienka, a small place in the Ural Mountains. We were all supposed to work on the construction. This was a small place where they build -- they were supposed to be build houses for miners, because they had a copper mine, and also the copper had a certain percentage of gold, so gold and copper was being taken out. And Jewish people came, and we were taught to build, and we worked in this region. Since I was below 18, so I did not have to work eight hours a day, but just six hours a day. And one day a week we had free, so the -- in the winter they volunteered me always to shovel snow, because there was plenty of snow. In the winter the temperature was unbelievably cold. I cr -- I did not e-expect -- I didn't hear about such cold, and we were work -- working on construction till minus 40 degrees. When there was minus 41, we could stay home. And we were supposed to work for one year. And this is what happened for one year. We worked there, and after that, they said you are free to go.

Q: I want to know a little bit more about the life there. Was -- was your family with you? Who -- who went with you? Did you -- were you able to sort of keep up some of your traditions? What was the life like?

A: No, n -- ta -- Jewish traditions we have not kept at all. We did not know when a holiday is. Approximately we knew a -- there will be Passover, but nobody knew about -- definitely we can dream about matzos, was only food and bread, and bread was also so and so much per family. There was a card system. Per person, you got such and such an amount of bread. All other things were not available. You couldn't go in a store if you want meat, you could buy only on the market, not in stores. Sugar you ca -- y -- they got - - they gave us -- we call it gave us, in other word we were buying, twice -- a few times a year, before a holiday. Like before the revolu -- anniversary of the revul -- revolution, and before the first of May, this is where we got -- we could buy the pound of sugar, or

two pounds of sugar per person. In other cities, in large cities in Russia was different, and I had a chance, because my mother was sick, and she stayed in Bialystok in the hospital, and after that, I went to pick her up, and I st -- went to -- I got from the encoverdare from the -- I would just call the near -- the DPU? Anyway, permission to go, to get the ti -- tickets. So I saw how I came -- stopped in Moscow, we slept there on the tr -- on the -- on the -- in -- at the station, and from there ti -- changed to another train to Bialystok. And in Moscow I could go out in the street, and -- and -- an-and buy sugar, so I -- I bought, I remember 10 on -- or 12 kilo, which is 20 pound of sugar, and carry it with me. Cause each time I went, I went in, there was a line where they gave only two pounds, but -- so I went five times, until they saw, "Hey, you were here already. I'll call a policeman." So I left. So I went -- went back. So I saw in other places in large cities that you can get. But when I -- then I brought my mother to Rakichenka, and they stayed there till we were free to -- to go where we want. My sister and my brother-in-law they had -- in the meantime had a little girl, and they decided to leave. My brother-in-law was getting letters from friends. And they said in the Polish part of Russia, like Bialystok, they were there, in charge, because they were Communists. And they said, "Come back, and you'll have -- you'll be alright. Come in." So they went. They came to the border, the former bor -- the former border between Poland, and they -- and they did not let them go through. So they came -- they came -- it was near Minsk, they went into Minsk. And here in Minsk, I -- I knew somebody, and the story was, when we were in Rakichenka, I learned fast to -- the language, to read and write Russian. And one day a young man came to me, "Sam, write me a letter in Russian." And he told me in Polish what to write, "Dear uncle, I am the son of your brother," so and so. "We received from your letters till 1936. In 1936, we stopped getting any letter. If you are alive, please write to me, I am here in Rakichenka, and I am here working till -- I am supposed to work till the end of 19 -- till 1940. And please write." After a short time he got a answer, and it came back to me, say -- the letter was written by his cousin. "Your uncle passed away, but I live in his house," and it said, "When you will free -- be free, come to Minsk, my husband is a officer in the Red army, he'll arrange for you to be able to stay in Minsk." And indeed, when our contract finished, he left for Minsk, and he kept -- he wrote us letters on a -- wrote them because we were -- thanks to me he got -- went there. "Oh," they say, "you can go in stores, they are -- you can get jobs here, and your -- and there is a different life." Temperature definitely no comparison. There is no such a temperature like it was in -- in Poland, close to. No in -- because in Rakichenka, we were about 10 days a year without wind. Winter was a cold wind blowing, in summer a hot wind blowing. Summer you -- you slept in the outside, because it was too hot to sleep in the house, and winter was too cold. So my sister and brother-in-law went to Minsk and -- and this officer arranged for them a place to stay, and a job. Because in a large city in Russia at that time, you could get a job if you had an apartment, if you had a place to live. And you could get a place to live if you had a job. So it was a circle, so that people from outside will not be able to get into the large city, because in the large -- large cities like Minsk, Kiev, and so on, there were -- it was another type of living than in the -- than in the small places where we were in -- deep in Russia. So they got their place to live, and they wrote a -- now it was my turn to come, because I wanted to start -- to continue to study. And in the large Russian cities, you

could work at day and study in the evening. You couldn't where we were in a small place, in -- in Rakichenka. We didn't have money for the whole family to leave, and when we -- we sold what -- what excess of -- we had, in order to -- so that I could buy a ticket for me, and I went. And I managed to come to Minsk, there were three weeks before the war started. Before June. So in June I went -- I came to -- to -- beginning of June to -- I came to Minsk. The 22nd of June, the -- the -- the Germans attacked, and Minsk was bombed. We tried to go back toward -- after few days we tried to go back toward Moscow, but the Germans were in front of us. They came from the north. They took Smollensk before they took Minsk. So we -- we ha -- had to go back. And after a month, they told the Jews to come to form the ghetto. So I -- yeah, I believe in July or in August, they formed the ghetto, and we were in ghetto in Minsk. In ghetto, life was -- we try -- we found a -- a -- a place, an unfinished house, one room. So we in the one room, my brother-in-law, sister, the child, and me -- and myself, so we are in one room. Again it started. The Germans were giving us -- giving us two pound of bread per person and that was that. So the people, in order to survive were selling various things, whatever they had. In Russia, people were assembling, everybody -- whatever was in the store, they were buying. I remember there was a saying when you went somewhere you saw suddenly a line, so th-the question was, what do they give? Once I asked, "Why do they say, what do they give? Why don't they say what do they sell?" So one was standing in line said, "If you buy it here, it is like you got it," because after that you can sell it for two or three times the price. So everybody was assem -- whatever they could buy, and everybody had so and so many yards of material. And so, as a whole, ke -- to keep it whole, a supply, not to wait when you need a pair of pants to buy a pair of pants. And this was a time when everybody was selling what they had. Peasants were coming from around the area, and the border of the ghetto was always a -- an exchange. We were living on this -- we were -- in the middle people were coming a -- we have a woman was coming, she has a suit she wants to change for potatoes. We -- my brother-in-law was [indecipherable] he used to go over to the Russian side. We always had -- had -- we could snap the -- the wire, there were wires around, and -- and g -- and go over, and -- and since he, as a whole looked like what they call a -- looked like a po -- a Pole, and so he was going out and there getting more than on the -- on the border. You know, he used to come and take it in, and I was standing, watching, and there is a policeman nearby. And giving him signs he has to come, or not to -- not to come. And this way we were -- we were getting there a little more than what you could get a-at a border, so we were in the middle mi -- in this way -- from this way we lived, we -- we got a certain amount of food from it.

Q: Was there a risk?

A: Oh yes, there was a risk, because there were a lot of people killed, I mean, but my brother-in-law even -- when -- later when the slats went even into -- into -- to villages. He went out of the city 10 - 20 miles, and there exchange it, and bring it back, were two guy. I went a few times, but since I wear glasses, they immediately recognized me as a Jew, and -- because Russians usually don't wear glasses. So I used to walk without glasses, and without glasses I don't see anything. So I couldn't go too much -- too often. Once or

twice I went -- once or twi -- a number of times I went out. There was one family was working the place where they were making vodka. [indecipherable] but he used to bring us so and so many bottles vodka, and we had a steady guy who was giving us food, either flour, or various kind of -- various kind of other -- other food for the -- for the vodka. We were a steady supplier, and we were giving them, and a little bit leaving over for us. And once I remember I went over and a policeman caught me, with a ra -- another guy and I -- and I was thinking a -- I was looking for a stone to hit him, because I -- you know, I will not go into the -- into the police station, because if somebody was taken to the police, he never came back. But he went with me, he saw where I came from, and he saw there the bottle vodka was still on the table, what I left, and there -- and they took me out into the -- took me back to the border and said, don't -- to the -- go -- go back to ghetto, don't ever come back, and that was strange. And after that, the guy with who [indecipherable] I saw him in -- in the ghetto. And I thought that it was two policemen. I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I am a -- I am a Jewish guy, and I was outside, and this policeman caught me. And then we saw you, walking with a bottle of vodka. So we went to this place, and I paid for the vodka so that he can take the vodka, and he let me go. And he let you go, too." So this was anything, this is how we were trying to get out. It was no problem to go out, because we always -- we're -- we're walking around with something to cut the wires, in order to be able to pass. But the question, well what you do after that? Everybody was -- most of the people were scared. There was one family to -- I used to go there to ask them for a piece of bread to bring to my sister, or -- and after that he begged me not to come, because he didn't open the door, because he said the neighbors know, they noticed it. Because they were afraid. They did not want to be killed just because I came there. So we were going -- we were taken to work. At work we were getting -- men were ge -- getting some food at work. And there I was always either begging, if it was a -- a -- if I -- if I cleaned the rooms of soldiers, begging them if they have a piece of bread. A good -- a good German was giving me a piece of bread, or something else to eat, and if he was bad, he gave me a kick. So if it was outside the cities, I was -- there were always something growing, so we're stealing a few -- a few carrots, or a few potatoes. And if the -- in the worse case, when they didn -- when I didn't have what to take, so I was taking even the clippings from potatoes from the -- from where we worked, for it was -- my sister used to wash the clipping, and make -- make from this potato latkes. And this is on what they lived. Since the war -- the war -- the wa -- there was one guy who we always were ascafed of, and his name was Gorajetski. He was a -- he had written on the -- belina politsi was written. He spoke Russian and German, obviously. And he could not eat breakfast without killing a Jew. And once we -- he got us, and we worked for him, my brother-in-law and myself, and we said never again. And this was not work, it was just making fun of us. Trying to catch -- to carry -- and running and beating us while we were carrying it from place to place, and then another group was taking it further, and so on. This was fun for him. So -- and after that, he organized like a -- a camp separate. The people could not come from [indecipherable] outside the ghetto. They were there with a group of Ukrainians were guarding it, and these people could not come home to the ghetto, they were sleeping over there. So whenever we saw him we did not go to work, because normally people -- other workers were coming, looking for people to work,

taking to work, doing either construction work, or cleaning, or whatever, and in the evening coming back at home, you know. This we wanted. In order to avoid, since they were looking for work -- were looking for workers each time, and looking for people to this camp -- it was on Schirrocca Street, I remember, we -- in order to be able to hide, we built a double wall. A very -- we moved the wall in our apartment, made it a little narrower. Since we worked in construction, I went to the neighbors room and covered it, a -- because otherwise we could -- you could see through. And in our place was just wood. So we could open, go in, hide, and -- and talk to neighbors, they realized, hey, whenever they're looking for -- for men, you are running home. Where do you hide in the -- in there? And then they saw the -- the Ukrainians are going in and coming out empty, no wa -- nobody -- they don't catch you. They looked -- they told us, they look for where we're hiding, and they didn't no -- they didn't no -- notice that we had build this -- this double wall to hide. Other people were hiding behind -- under the floor -- the fir -- floor, there was a place to crawl in, and they were hiding there. So this was as long as they were looking just for men, and once we saw e -- they were taking whole families. Since we lived all in a place where the street was a free, for Aryan, not for Jews, on the other side was ghetto, on this side was a ghetto. And so we saw they were -- they take -- they took whole families, a few thousand people. And taking them out and then they never came back. And they shortened the ghetto, they made the ghetto smaller. So we start to think, what do we do for -- if -- if they come here? In addition to wait, we started to hear that they have automobiles where they put in people, and put the gas in -- in automobile, and they gas the people in there. So whenever we heard -- heard cars coming, we started to hide. What to do with the -- your little girl, the little girl that we too -- took her in between the wall, was crying there. So we cided -- decided to build something on the first of this -- we lived on the second floor. On the first floor, there was one part which was not finished. In one of the not finished room, they build a deep, in the ground, we put wa -- tube, so to -- so they'll get air, and there we saw, when the little girl was crying, outside you didn't hear. So the next time there was a thing where we had to hide, I was taking my brother-in-law, sister, and the child to this, lay down, and I was covering it with sand. Sand made it even so that you don't see that anything is there. Then I was going up and hiding in the -- between the door. And this way how we were all kind of -- we call it pogroms, we survived the pogroms in this way.

Q: Talk a little bit about these pogroms, what you saw, what was going on.

A: Mostly it was the -- the killers were Ukrainians. They were -- they surrounded a -- a -- an area, took the Jews out, into the forest nearby. In most of the cases, we knew that there will be a pogrom, because there are people who worked for the ge -- for the -- in the city, and they heard a -- a group sondercommander came in. And when a sondercommander came in, means something will be happening -- will be happening in the ghetto. And indeed, they used to use Ukrainians or Latvians, and encircle a certain area, one street, or two street, take all the people out in the morning, and lead them out from the city. In most of the cases, we saw them through this way, between the ghetto, wik -- which was a -- a passage from north to south. So we su -- sometime when we looked, we saw hey, they are

taking out a group of people, a number of people. And once they have circled also, the people from the other side of the street, and they emptied there. So I thought they'll make the ghetto smaller. And they -- instead of this, they brought German Jews. Jews from Hamburg, Jews from Czechoslovakia, they brought there, and they were there.

Q: In the other side?

A: In the other side. So, to go over there wit -- there was one place near the Judenrat, where there was a door -- a door to go across the street and go to the other side. In the middle we were not allowed because we had to wear a -- what -- we would -- we did not have a Star of David like Jews in Poland or in Germany had, but a round yellow -- yellow -- a yellow circle. In the beginning I used not -- not to wear it. But then -- and I heard that several people were caught and they were shot because they did not have the yellow sign, so I started to wear the yellow sign here. If I wanted to go into the Aryan side, I covered it, and in ghetto I was going like this.

Q: Did you see -- did you feel safe walking on the streets of the ghetto?

A: In the ghetto, in most of the cases yes, except when this Gorajetski was -- was in. Then -- he was coming in always with a group of y -- of Ukrainians, and then definitely, men were not saved. Often during the time when the men were at -- at work, this Gorajetski used to come into the ghetto and circle two or three street, take all the women out into the -- into a place, and ask for gold. In the beginning nobody was giving him, but -- so he took two women and shot them. So then everybody who had all their rings, and wedding rings, he used to collect in -- in -- in suitcases, and was getting suitcases from the rooms, going around. So if he survived, he had a lot of gold, because each time he was taking a different -- a different area. You know, somehow, Russian Jews had also gold rubles from the last time, they had hidden. He wa -- he was collecting everything.

Q: Was there any logic to who was taken out? Did they go for certain types of people?

A: No, when they were taking out, they were taking out whole families. They were taking areas. They had an area a -- the main street, the -- the ghetto, two or three streets shorter, till one da -- this was all -- yes, till it was summer '42. We had to stay at work for four days. Once I remembered exactly the date. I think it was in July, but I don't -- I don't recall now. And at that time, they took all the women and children out, and killed them. And I remember after four days we were going back, and everybody was crying, being sure that his relatives, his wives, children, or mothers are -- are gone. And we thought so too, my brother-in-law and myself, I went. And then we came and my sister and the child were alive. And she said on the third day after she saw that we did not come, she wanted already to go out. What she did is, she was going in -- into -- sitting in th -- in the hiding place without cover. And she was -- and why didn't I -- the Germans not come, I can't understand. And after this [indecipherable] because we wanted the Germans not to come, so we started to use the approach to it as a toilet, because we wanted not people to come.

Once I -- I -- I heard Germans were saying -- came in and I did not run up to, yet, to my door. When they were downstairs, "Och, this smells like urine, the -- the -- the dirty Jews." So they use [indecipherable] especially use it -- use it [indecipherable] all. So I assume that this is when -- so the approach to the -- to the hiding place was dirty and had to -- you had to go in -- in through -- in the -- and they did not want to do it. So this is how she survived. And she thought that we were probably all taken out to be killed. So she wanted already to go out, and then she says she waited, and then we came. When we walked out in the street, my little niece was the last Jewish child in -- in -- in Minsk -- in the ghetto Minsk. Cause you didn't see, and everybody looked. "Hey, a child." Because, yes, women survived, either they were working, or they were hiding somewhere. But children were not -- she was the last one alive. And this was a time when already we started to get contact with people who knew something about partisans.

Q: Before we get into that, I wanted to ask you some general questions about the ghetto. I'm sort of -- I'm interested in a lot of things about the ghetto, in terms of the organization. You talked about working, and what kind of work was there. Who ran the ghetto, were there -- you know, did you have health facilities, did you have cultural facilities? Were -- did -- were there any schools, were there any sort of hidden activities?

A: No, there was no -- at least -- we were -- sees, we were strangers. We were not locals. Maybe there was a certain amount of distance between the -- these people and us. But we were not aware of any cultural activities. But there was a Judenrat. And the Germans told one, you will be in charge of the Jew. And initially was one who did not want too well to cooperate with the Germans. And I forgot his name, I we -- once I knew.

Q: Was this Barash?

A: No.

Q: No.

A: And after that became a eastern -- one -- a Polish Jew that came in charge, and he cooperated very well with the Germans. So -- and there were also Jewish policemen, who were forced to do dirty work, sometimes to -- to -- a -- as a whole you didn't trust the -- the -- them. Obviously in charge of them were -- were -- were Germans, and there were always German police, and there were Belarusian police, and Ukrainians.

Q: All in the ghetto?

A: All around the ghetto. Stay on the outside, they were always. Occasionally also Latvian came in. You never --

Q: Inside the ghetto?

A: Inside the ghetto were only Jewish police, and you see -- you saw here and there, SS.

Q: I think we need to change the tape.

End of Tape #1

Tape #2

- Q: Okay, I wanted to ask you a little bit more about the Minsk ghetto before we move on, what you can remember about the daily life, or what kind of work you did.
- A: I was in -- in the ghetto for over a year, I would say, about 14 months. And usually the -- you did not have any cultural life organ -- organized. It was everything there I saw temporary to survive, to try to survive. If there was an organization, health organization, yes. There was a -- a hospital, we were trying to take care. As a matter of fact, I was once -- I got sick from a friend, and there was a -- one guy from my city, from Shasnich in ghetto, and he came, and obviously there was no place to sit but to sit on the bed and he s-sat on the pl -- on the bed where I was sleeping on, and after a short time I heard that he got sick with typhoid. And I got sick after i -- after i -- after him, too. And they took me to the hospital, and I had such a high fever, that I remember after that that I was saying, "Hey, the war is over. My sister came to take me out, and you don't let her in." And I was going to open the door. And when I went from -- up from the bed, I fell on the floor. This I still -- this I still remember. And they put me ba -- back in. And when the fever was down, I could go home -- home. I could go back out of there and a -- I -- I hardly could walk the -- the -- the -- because the legs completely lost p -- lost power. But in -- in another two or three weeks, I came back to my -- to my normal -- I became back to my normal me, and I started to go to work again. The type of work where to serve a -- the military -- the Germans, you know. Either they were adding something, cleanin -- cleaning where they lived, cleaning the rooms was -- and this is something what I -- what people were looking for, because we could always get something from them to eat, to go out. Or it was other construction work, road work, cleaning. I tried to get away from it, only to where we can be -- be inside, I tried. The -- at work, we were getting soup. So everybody was going always with something where you can pour soup in, in -- and -- and they had -- it was Jewish girls who were preparing the soup for us to eat. They were also coming with us, and going back. We could not walk on the street, and we are taking -- we had to walk -- you could not walk on the -- where people walk. We had to -- in the street, Jews were not allowed, Jews were -- had to go only where the horses were going, and the car. Not -- not on the sidewalk. You -- after the war, I remember myself when I saw my -- my wife walking on the street side, why not -- why don't -- it bothered me, why don't you walk where people walk? Because I thought I was always under still the impression that this is where Jews were forced to walk, on the -- in the ci -- in the ghetto, very few people si -- tried to stay -- to go out, in order to survive, because otherwise you didn't have what to eat. My si-sister was not -- of not working, so -- because of the child, and we were trying to bring something, and sometimes there were looking -- we carry back food, occasionally they were searching and taking away. So I had always a bag hanging, and it was hanging down to the -- because they were searching in the pockets, and I had always a piece of bread, potatoes or whatever, hanging down be-between the knee and the ankle, because there they were not looking. Also -- and sometimes I was having also something to put dirty -- make dirty the -- the -- the -- so that they'll not touch here. Th --

used to make dirty from excrement, put on the -- on -- on my pants, in order so that they'll not touch here, and after come home and clean it. To --

Q: They weren't factories or anything?

A: No factory work, it's wor --

Q: How did -- how did you get chosen for work? Did -- could you say -- h -- h -- who determined --

A: We were -- there was a place in the front of the Judenrat where you come in to work, and w -- and Germans were coming in, soldiers, and choosing people. Sometimes they were looking for people to work in construction, so everybody who did work in construc -- or did know -- know -- like I -- I -- since I worked before in construction, I used to do that. You tried only -- I tried to avoid always not to work for the SS, not to work for Gorajetski, because he was ending up taking the men into the camp, which I said th-they never came back to -- to -- to the ghetto.

Q: Was there any sense of normalcy, was there a social life, was there religious --

A: No. Jews did not know -- Jews in -- Russian Jews did not know much about religious life, because they were already so and so many years without religion. And -- but a return to Yiddish did occur. In the beginning, everybody was speaking Russian. And slowly, people started to speak Yiddish, more and more Yiddish. And even Russian Jews were not too fluent Yiddish, started to speak yid -- Yiddish. And you could see immediately the effect of -- [indecipherable] of Polish Jews who were -- who were in the ghetto, because they liquidated small places, and those who survived came to -- to Minsk, also other Russian je -- places, the ghettos were immediately liquidated, or slowly, and -- and they came to -- to Minsk. So Minsk had about -- the ghetto had about 120,000 Jews, and they were not just Jews from Minsk, but also from -- but mostly from the surrounding area. So culturally I could not see anything Jewish going on. Was -- everything was temporary -- temporarily. Russian Jews was hoping a -- the Red Army will come back, and viddle will maybe save them. Probably the Germans kept it, th-they thought they will simply liquidate -- kill slowly. And we came in contact with people who knew something about -- tha -- something that partisans are in the area, by -- somebody asked my brother-in-law, "We heard that you have a place to -- a hiding place," a marinar we called it -- was called in -- in Russian. There is here a guy Smoller, whom the Gestapo is looking for. Could you hide him? My brother-in-law said, "Yes, no problem." And we knew Smoller, because he was for a certain time sleeping at a family nearby in the -- in our -- in the same ar -- in the same house, neighboring door, and there was no place here, so he slept with me in my bed, we slept together. And he -- well, I was astonished to hear that he personally knew Stalin, that he was a member of the Communist party for so and so many years, from o -- the Polish and n -- that they were -- that the Gestapo is looking for him, so we s -- we said, "Yes, we'll hide him." And sure enough we put him in the place

there where my -- where we were hiding my sister and the -- their little girl. And then I remember a lady came, she wanted to see him, we let her in also, and they talked for a certain time, and then away. In his book, Smoller described that oh -- that -- Sukaravich is the name of my -- my brother-in-law, hid him in a place where they probably hid -- was hiding things. He didn't know we did it -- we build it especially for my little niece. So after a certain time -- he was there several days, and he was ready to go away, and he said that he'll get us in touch with people, and -- when they will be looking for people to go into the forest.

Q: Was there an underground movement in the ghetto, and did you know about it?

A: We did not know much about it, no. Were only selected people. We knew from time and time -- to time that young people went away. And what happened is, after that, that the Gestapo was coming and killing the remaining family, when they heard a -- these young people were -- they killed overnight. So it was a danger if people left. And who told them, this I don't know, that could have been these were -- Jewish police were telling them. And there were some Jewish policemen who were mean. And they helped -- as a matter of fact, one after that was so -- was in such -- such -- that when he tried after that to escape, and he was caught, and he came to the forest, the Jewish partisan killed him. The way he behaved in the -- in ghetto. But it was very difficult, they were very -- they were chose -- they were choo -- choos -- choosing -- the chosen people were -- had -- had contact. It was not easy. We got contact through this way, that we did hide Smoller, and he really after that send somebody. Since we expected after that to leave the ghetto, the question was what to do with the little girl. And at that time where my brother-in-law worked, was a very decent man, a soldier, who hated the SS the way we hated it. Heinz was his name, and I don't recall what his family name, unfortunately. He was from Berlin. And this was a -- a group of soldiers who were repairing cars, mechanics mostly. My brother-in-law was coming there [indecipherable] once I remember he told them, I worked here a coup -- a couple days, and this Heinz came to me once with a book. And it was -- it showed the Hotencroids taking and circling the map of Europe. And he wanted me to translate it, what is written, into German. And I was afraid to, and he said, "Go ahead, don't afraid." And I told him the name of the book is that the German want to occupy -- it's German fascist wants to occupy whole Europe. And he asked me what year was it published. I told him '36. So there was a group of soldiers, he say, "See comrades? In 1936, they already here knew that we will be spilling our blood all over Europe." I couldn't believe it, because the first time I heard a German speaking in this way about Germany. And he came to our house even, after that, and once after the war, at work, and once even they asked, "Oh, if there is something wrong, if you're see -- know something is wrong in the ghetto, come to us, stay in our place." And the officer pretended he did not hear it, I remember, what he said. So we asked him if he could d-do us a favor, put the child into an orphanage. We told him where there is an orphanage, and put her there that he found her. [indecipherable] a name Faynia Nikolayov Nasoharova, I still remember, that this is her name, and I was teaching her her name. And so that whenever we were asking neighbors to ask her what her name, so she always used to say Faynia.

Faynia Nikolayov Nasoharova. But when I asked her, she used to say, "But really, I am Fanyat Zokor." She -- two years old. And that -- he put her there, and he used to come after work. My sister started to work also in that place. So after work, he brought all the workers to -- back to the ghetto, and he used to take my sister -- tell her to take off the -- or put on another -- something, a blouse, so that you don't see the -- the -- the yellow sign, took her out like he walks -- walks with a fräulein. He used to go -- go with her so that she -- a b -- a block away from the ghetto she used to watch -- observe the girl. She was sitting always alone, not playing with the other children. One day the -- somebody came and said they are ready to -- that we should leave. And we said goodbye at that time. A day before that said goodbye to -- to Heinz. And next day, you -- you said according to -- we worked out -- we went up like we were going to work, and after that, everybody took off the -- the -- the yellow signs, and we were -- went -- we had a woman who was leading us out of the city. We walked into the -- into the forest.

Q: How large of a group?

A: We were 30 people.

Q: Men and women?

A: Men and women walked out. And there in the group, they put me s -- when they heard that I had a sister -- not together there, not to be with the sister and -- and -- and brother-in-law, I don't why, they put me into another group, and -- and they formed the a -- or otriad, they called them -- it will come back, the name I knew. [indecipherable] I didn't write it down, the name. And I was in another otriad, you know? And a -- a otriad is a -- the -- the group of Russian -- group of people. And we were going from place to -- we were -- we build -- we had a place in -- in the -- in the forest from the -- in the forest from there where we used to go out. There were a number of things to do. A, food, collecting food. B, it was do something, f-fighting. If there were -- in the beginning we were several people in -- in a -- in a village each time. If a German came, he did not come back, because we used to -- they -- they didn't expect to be -- the partisans will be in the village, the qui -- Germans used to come and collect eggs. And because I -- apparently they did not get enough eggs from where they were. So we -- we used to kill them. But there were not too many such cases, but in -- slowly it -- it was known to them that in German stopped -- Germans stopped coming into the -- the village. So we got orders after that to move to -- back toward former Poland, the Russian not -- in other word, close in direction Bialystok. On the way Germans and Ukrainians circled us and we were -- yeah, we were dispersed. The name of the -- of the o -- otriad where my brother and sister was Lasop. And -- and I was -- slowly we so -- we were divided into small groups. We were about 10 people ins -- siz -- a lot of them were local people who were -- instead of being forced to go to Germany as workers, came to partisans, and to the -- so when they were -- when we were broken up, went back home, and we remained three guys -- another Jewish guy named Abrusha, and a Moscow guy, he didn't have where to go. He was also a young person. We sat for a few days in our former place in the forest, and then we ci --

we all decided we'll try -- there is another partisan group, Chicalifsky group, we'll go to them. And sure enough, they accep -- accepted us immediately, and I stayed with this Chicalifsky group till the end of the war.

Q: Now this is a Soviet partisan , this is not necessarily Jewish.

A: No, not necessarily Jewish. The -- we heard about the Jewish group, Bialsky, who actually could live after that because we were there, because we would like to -- to say the guard for -- for them. But there were Jews in the place where I was, one Jew was a very famous guy. Not -- also the second one. We used -- we used to go out here, I saw something being done. Each time the group of 10 people, eight - 10 people used to go out and blow up a train. Usually we were blowing up trains going towards the front. And I was told this, that in the beginning, it -- they were blowing up the trains by -- by the weight of th -- that was blowing up. So the Germans put two, three wagons of sand in front of them, so it was blowing up the sand trains and they were slowing down. Because we try to put always mines in a place where there is a -- a bend, because then, in the beginning, if they were going fast, it was -- the whole train was going downhill. So they used slow down in the area, and -- and when they put sand, they were blowing up the sand and nothing happened, so there was a Jew -- the Jewish lieutenant, he came up with the idea that he was using hand grenades. The biyoke I don't know how it is called in -- in -- in English, the place -- the thing which blows -- which s-starts the -- the hand grenade, used to unscrew it, make a -- make a -- a hole in -- in -- in a -- local places, he was finding a place which -- where they can put -- drill in metal. We were taking 50 kilo, or hundred pound bombs -- shells. These were plenty, which left from the Russian army, were drilling a hole, puttin -- put there -- screw in there the -- the handle from the hand grenade, open it, and through the ring, put this -- a wire through shmore -- in German how it is a -- so we were sitting hundred yards away, and we pulled it, it was blowing. So we -- we didn't have -- we di -- the le -- the -- the -- the fuel -- always when we saw a train, the first thing, you know, we're looking what -- what is in it. If there was some -- so-somewhere petrol, they always blew it under the petrol, because this made it th-the whole train was going up in flames. If there were no petrol, we looked at the a-ammunition. And if there -- the -- and the third choice was people. And if this was not a - - so we used to blow up the -- the locomotive in order to -- so tha -- tha -- they wi -- they will have no locomotives. So this -- this was a choice of it. And the s -- each time another group was going with this device were used to blowing up -- blow up trains.

Q: Now, logistically, I'm trying to understand how you would know when it -- before a train came by, what to -- what to attack, what your priority was here.

A: Oh I -- this was as I said, the priority. We were looking for trains going in the direction of -- to the fr -- toward Russia. And the -- the -- and the priorities what I have mentioned was -- we are loo -- we look to --

Q: How did you -- how did you know that?

A: Oh, we did not know. We looked at the train, and we saw hey, do we see any -- any -- if we didn't see any -- anything special, so we blew up the locomotive. And most of the cases, when they were ga -- going a little fast, the whole thing wer -- because we was choosing a place where there is a -- a -- a bend, and if not, whatever pla -- train which was going toward the front wa -- but you could see th -- if there are people, soldiers, or if they're -- they are -- they are ammunition, this you could see.

Q: Now, here you are, one time a boy who was studying a Talmud, all of a sudden blowing up trains. How -- what -- did they tr --

A: And I became a specialist.

Q: Did they -- did they -- did they train you? I mean, how did --

A: No, no one, but your --

Q: How did you -- how did you learn how to do all these things?

A: The len -- as I said, this officer, this Jewish officer, Jewish lieutenant, he was the one who gave explanation how -- wa -- how it works, and this is why we knew how to -- but -- and he used to prepare it. And we used to go out and -- and do the job. This was t -- for a certain time til -- after that the contact with Russia became -- with -- became stronger, and they sent people over to -- to us, and we build a -- in the -- in Alebotska, because we moved each time more towards -- toward west each time, we were in Alebotska forest, they rebuild -- there were two guys who were in our otriad who were -- one was a pilot who -- a former pilot, and the other was one who were working, who was working in a -- on an airfield in ra -- in Russia. And they were in charge of -- and they chose me to help them because I was Polish -- speaking Polish for -- if we g -- went out into the local places. And we built a place where planes could land. And I remember the first plane -- we were building fire -- we build fires between the two -- the fires, they could land, they landed in. And the first plane was -- bombed a city nearby, and then it -- it landed. And he brought us TNT, 200 gram pieces. And after they knew what -- why -- why they were small pieces of ta -- rather than one -- one large, because they wanted us to stop blowing up trains, but blow up the whole railroad, the railroad. The rails, simply blow. And we called it after that, concert. We go to -- for it -- to a concert. Why? Because used to go out -- now not eight people [indecipherable], but the whole otriad which was 120 people. And going along 50 people on one side, 50 on the other side, and along the -- and since the Germans had cut the trees along the railroad on both side for a hundred yards, so that they could hear. And they build places where they had sitting eight - 10 people every -- every few miles, guards. The -- we were walking, we yelled hurrah, they were scared and they were running away. And we were thr -- four people, I was one of the -- of them, who were -- who prepared before that, 200 gram of TNT, and a piece, and a wire, to which you lit the wire. And when it come here -- a-and when the fire hit the -- it was blowing

up. And it -- in this way, we blew up every -- a rail is approximately seven yards, about seven, eight yards. So each rail, we were blowing on four lines. So four guys were -- and four guys were going bi -- a-after me, and they were those who were -- this way to -- to lit these wires. So here we were -- we were still putting, and there -- and they was blowing boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. So they called it our concert, we are going to play a con -- and this is how we were blowing up for five - 10 kilometers, and several of the otriads were doing it, so after that, we knew the next day, hey, the Red army will start an offensive. And indeed, this night, they were starting an offensive, and everything. No help could come to -- this was a -- their objective. They said that we will help them much more by blowing up the railroad -- the rails, than killing a few Germans, or -- or -- or killing wa -- or destroying one train.

Q: Now did you -- did you ha-have guns as well, or --

A: Oh yes, everybody had a gun, and we had machine guns, and we had also cannons, small cannons. But guns we had, ammunition this was -- came from -- we got it from the peasants, actually. The peasants were -- did hide all kind of ammunitions which the Russian army -- the Red army left when they were escaping. And everybody w - was hiding. And we used from neighbors find out a -- which peasant has a machine gun, or -- or has a -- a cannon. We used to come them, give us -- to us, or we'll do this and this and this. Most of the cases they gave us. We heard that you have it. And after that, when we started to get -- we didn't need really ammunition, we used it sparely, but we had ammunition.

Q: Well, you mention the -- the -- the peasants. Were sort of the local people pretty cooperative with you, in terms of, I guess, giving you food --

A: No.

Q: -- or did they -- were they kind of afraid to have you so close by?

A: There were various kinds. Those obviously whose sons were policemen, were -- didn't like us to -- to [indecipherable]. And we fou -- we found out we cou -- who was, and we used to force them to leave, take away their last -- last -- everything what they have, whether pigs or -- or -- or cows, and -- so that they will go into the city where their sons are. But I -- there remained many -- must -- most of the po -- of the population hated the Germans, too. Because the Germans started to -- wanted their -- the youn -- young people to go to sl -- take a slave workers to -- to go to Germany, and they prefer that the sons will go into the partisans and ca -- come from time time home to visit them, and to -- and to go to -- to Germany. So the local population, because of the way -- the attitude of the German [indecipherable] population was friendly to us, most of it. Except in the area where there were Poles. Wherever there were White Russians, Belarus, it was -- they were friendly, but where there were Poles, and once were Polish partisans were in various villages, you know, and they were always bothering us. I never heard about this Polish

group that they killed a German, but they were bothering partisans. So we once encircled them, disarmed them, and told them to go. And then it became quiet.

Q: So there -- what I'm hearing is there wasn't so much cooperation between different partisan groups, or --

A: Oh, between -- between the Russian partisan groups was good cooperation, we never had cooperations with -- with Polish partisan. Was never good. Because they considered Russians also as enemies.

Q: But you also had a common enemy?

A: Yes, this is true, but nevertheless, this is -- was the different attitude of the Polish group which came after that. But as long as the Polish group were under the influence of the Polish government in England, it was no cooperation.

Q: Now --

A: And the [indecipherable] local [indecipherable] there was one lady who somehow, she liked me. I -- I remember I came to the villa -- whenever I came to the village a few times, I came for breakfast, or to eat something, the only thing what you can eat is there, it was milk, eggs, and -- and potatoes. So she was always to -- to prepare for me, and I remember once I felt I cannot go each time to this lady, and I ate somewhere else. And after that she came and, "What? Does somebody's pot -- egg taste different than my egg?" Why didn't I come to her? And she somehow liked me. She knew that I am Jewish, and she wanted always -- whenever I came -- came -- to come to eat at her place. And this was a time where we did not live any more in the forest, but in the villages. And each village had a partisan as a commander. And in the forest were only -- we had the hospital in the forest, where our wounded people were -- were -- were. And people to guard the -- the -- the -- the hospital and so one. Most of people were in the -- in the villages.

Q: Were there women in the partisans?

A: Yes, many women, and they were doing the same thing wa -- was men were doing. In 19 -- it was '44? No, '43, 60,000 Germans came and circled our forest for several days. And we knew we cannot fight, they came with tanks, and ya -- we're -- we didn't have the ammunition what they had. So we divided ourself into a small group of 10 people, and we said, when we survive, after -- in a months, we said, we'll meet here or here, in this place. And I remember our group of 10 people chose an island which was -- around it was marsh, so we knew a -- the Germans will be a-afraid to walk to the marsh, because when you start to walk in a marsh, and you start sinking, you had a funny fee -- you have in a funny feeling that you don't know when it will stop. And slowly I -- so another group joined us from another otriad, and we were after that about 30 people, and I was the leader to -- on the way through the marsh because I was the lightest, only. So if I sank to

the knee in the marsh, the heavy guys, or women were sinking to their -- their breast into the mud. So I chose a way to go, and went on the island. And we were there for eight days, they encircled us. The only food we had was blueberries. It was the only thing what we could eat. And you could hear the Germans talking, you could hear around the Ukrainians yelling in Ukrainian. When it became quiet, they went away, we decided we'll try, and again I was the leader out. We went out, and -- and I took three guys with me to go in ahead and the remaining were all -- and I remember in one place we came, we saw German soldiers. And I told them we don't shoot, but I send -- I'm back to the main group and told them that we have here German soldier, because to run, we don't have the strength, we were too weak to run. Yes, we can kill these two -- three guys, and after that, we'll have to run. So they let them go by, they -- they said yes, it was a good decision because we -- and I remember I came out to the village t -- the first village [indecipherable] and the peasants who wa -- say, "Hey there are Germans on the other side of the village. How do you" -- We say, "Give us something to eat," because otherwise -- I remember they gave us fast, "Go, go." They were afraid of us, that they will -- will be seen, I remember I brought something to eat to everybody. After eight or 10 days we were without food. And they went away, and then in the German papers, they published -- they showed once the paper, we were getting the paper from the -- from local people I remember, I got in German, I saw hey, I told our lieutenant, Vitezev was his name. "You are dead, they call you, they -- they had ru -- th-th-they killed you." So I told him he -- "So somewhere how do we show them that we are alive?" "Let's go out and blow a train up." "You are right." So we went and blew a train up. So they are sure that we are still al-alive, and then -- and then after that we stopped, I remember, this was the last train. We stopped after that because we had all to do -- to make concerts only.

Q: Now, we're talking about this many years later, but you're expressing a real sense of kind of adventure, and -- and ther -- a -- a certain elation about it right now. It must have been scary.

A: It wa -- it was. Oh, it was scary, and it was -- on the other hand it was elation that I have a gun, too. That I'll not be led to be killed. That I'll kill somebody before, you know, I'll be killed. This feeling was what gave -- gave us the desire to -- to -- to continue. And th -- revenge [indecipherable]. I did kill many after that. When the German army came close, we were afraid, I remember still at that time that we thought, oh, we will not survive the war, this -- because we cannot fight tanks, and -- and -- and cannons will come back, a organized army. But they came split in small groups, we were catching them and killing them. And I remember one day, Lieutenant Vites -- Vitezev came to me said, "We have here -- we had about hundred soldiers, enough of killing. I heard that in the next," -- the city nearby, I forgot the name -- "th-the Red army is over there. Take them, let them do with them what's -- what's," -- so, the w-were 10 people guarding this hundred German soldiers, there were also White Russian policemen. We walked towards the city. We came toward the road and I head tanks. I said, "Everybody lie down." I said to our guys, "If these are German tanks, whatever we'll say to the -- to the Germans to be quiet, they will not listen, they will jump out, and we run back to the forest. We don't wait for -- wi -

- for them to -- to be coming. If they are Russian tanks, fine." Sure enough -- and I told to the Germans, "You sit quiet, all. If not, you'll -- we'll kill you all. First you -- you will be killed." And then we listened, and then I saw it, it was a Russian tank. So we stood up, and -- and I remember that they turned -- they thought there are so many Russian sol -- German soldier, they turned toward us, they had machine guns. And I yelled to them, "Don't shoot, don't shoot." And they stopped and one yelled out, "Who are you?" I said, "Partisans." The officer jumped out, he -- I remember he kissed me. "Who are they?" "German soldiers we are taking," we told him. "Taking them to the -- to the city, to," -- And he sa -- one with another uniform, now who is -- who is this? And I said, "This is a Russian policeman." "And you don't know what to do with them?" He took out his gun, shot it. He says, "You killed your brothers, sisters, and -- and -- and -- and you want now to escape with the Germans?" This was my first encounter with the German -- with the Russian army. I took them to the city, they took from us the soldiers. And a short time later, our group all joined the ru -- the Russian army.

Q: Now in -- before you join the -- the army -- the -- I'm sort of curious about the make-up, you said that there were women fighting with you. Did -- and it also sounds like you were sort of the leader of your group.

A: Not the leader, I was not -- whenever it came something with German, they -- they used to use me, I was the only one who spoke German.

Q: What was the age range of the people fighting with you? Were they all young?

A: From -- from 15 to 55.

Q: And a couple questions, one is, did you feel any anti-Semitism, and the other one is did you come across family camps?

A: Family?

Q: Family camps in the forest.

A: No.

Q: I mean, what happened to all of the --

A: No, I did not. We camped, from time to time we met people from Bielskyotrout, which was a Jewish group. They were -- they were coming out also to select food or what, but I really did not know where they are. And my attitude was at that time, hey, they are not fighters [indecipherable]. It is all after the war that I realized that they did such a great job, that they saved so many peop-people. At that time, I was only more -- I was thinking only about how many Germans to kill. This was my reveng -- revenge. But myself, I

never met th-the camp of Bielsky. I knew -- I heard that they -- that they -- that the reason that they are people there with women and children.

Q: Wasn't there also a -- the Zurin camp as well?

A: Yeah.

Q: Large camp.

A: Yeah. And I did not --

Q: And you were not treated differently as a Jew?

A: No, with -- with -- within our group, no, but there was a certain amount from -- not from the top. As I said, this lieutenant who was killed just a -- a month before we met the Ru-Russian army he was killed. He was one of the -- of the most regar -- highly regarded guys in -- in -- in -- in our otriad. And there was another Jewish guy, he -- we used to count how many -- how many trains somebody -- everybody participated in blowing up, and he had the highest number of trains blown up, because everybody liked to go with him. He was very gregarious, singing, dancing, he was the first to find out where some -- where there is vodka in the place, and where there is girls in the evening are assembling, and we -- to go there, and sing with them, and dancing. So -- and he was also killed just before the end of -- of the -- of -- in '44, I don't remember now exactly the months when we met the [indecipherable] there when the Red army came into our place. We were on our way to go deeper, we were supposed to go deeper to -- in towar -- in p -- in Poland, because the -- the Russian army liked us to be in the back of the German army, because we did a -- a good in -- a good job, apparently. So we -- we were supposed to go b-backwards when -- when the ger -- ger -- Russian army came.

Q: There must have been an incredible bond amongst the people within your group, and maybe with other groups as well. Incredible trust.

A: I wouldn't only -- everybody was for himself actually. And a e -- we knew that yes, as a groups, and -- was -- matter of fact, one Jewish guy was killed because of -- he was shot by partisans. He was a member of our -- of our group, and he was standing guard for -- he called me after that, that -- when he was sleeping, it -- with the partisans, somebody took out his bullets. So when he went on -- he didn't check if he has it when he went on guard, and the guy who was allegedly working with the Germans -- I don't know for sure what he was doing, it did open through the roof and try -- and escaped. And he was sh -- he shot him, but he didn't have any -- any ammunition. Till he took out and found am-ammunition and put in, it was al -- he was gone, it was in the forest at night. And for this, he was shot, because losing a prisoner, they were shooting. Losing a rifle, they were shooting.

Q: So it was a very sort of strong code of --

A: Yeah, and I remember once I was -- ma -- myself in a sled -- in -- in -- in -- horse and sled, and suddenly I realized -- and I was drinking there in -- in a place, and going to -- to another place, [indecipherable] hey, hey, my rifle. I lost it. I turned around and back, and it was two yar -- two miles away, it was laying in the middle of the road. And I saved myself -- and this was the last time I drank vodka. Because -- and afterward I saw most of -- these two guys who were -- were mentioned, wa -- th-they were killed also, because they -- they were killed because they were drinking, drunk. More partisans were killed because of vodka than because of real fights.

Q: You mean because of other partisans deciding they were too big of a risk?

A: No, th-they were always -- they were killed by -- by Germans or Ukrainians, but their actions were limited because of the -- of -- they were drunk.

Q: And you also s -- you also indicated that there was a certain amount of socializing and fraternizing when you weren't fighting.

A: Yes, with the local population always coming in, and most of them, use -- in the evening used to sometime girls sit together and -- and knit. So we were looking for a place a -- in there we used to sing together, and -- and -- because the local population was very pos -- positive to us. I me -- as I mentioned there were some of our men who were member -- who lived, who had their parents and sisters nearby. So -- so there was a -- the relationship was good of the local, except, as I said, if they were just pure Poles, then it was a different situation. But there were not -- but there were not many, because we were not yet in Poland. We were all -- everything was in Belarus.

Q: But that must have added a little bit of balance to the kind of seriousness of your mission.

A: Oh, we never doubted about the seriousness, but it gave a certain amount of -- I knew a lot of Russian songs, just because listening to them singing and dancing.

Q: Let's change tapes.

End of Tape #2

Tape #3

- Q: Okay, well, I think we were talking about your experience with the partisans, and I don't know if there's anything else you want to add before moving on.
- A: No. There were a -- there were a couple of Jewish families who were close by hidden in the fore -- in the forest, and they were joined into our group. So in this way there were tow -- this was toward the end they were joined into -- into our -- but nothing special. I was -- I did not have any contact specially with Jews, or with any Jewish organizations.
- Q: What time period are we talking about now?
- A: This is -- this is as a partisan. I did not know --
- Q: Right, but -- but what date -- I mean, how fa -- how far along are we?
- A: This was till spring '44. This is when -- through '43, '44. '43 was when they were stir -- when we were still in the forest, I circled what I had d-described, and after that through the winter, and in the spring '44, the red a -- the -- the army came close.
- Q: Okay, then I -- I guess I have one -- one question and then I -- I'd like you to continue. You describe that at some point, and I think this was sometime in 1943, the Soviet partisans were then really working under the command of Moscow, I think.
- A: Right.
- Q: And that's when you built the airstrip, and --
- A: Yeah.
- Q: And did your operations, an-and to some extent I guess your -- your goals changed, but did -- did it feel different?
- A: No. The only thing was it was felt that we are now a part of helping the -- the army. And that we are not doing just in order to kill here and there a German to be -- be c -- in scaring them, or frightening them, that we are doing a job in cooperation with the -- with the army. Because it was not important for them that we blow up somewhere a -- more a train or less a train, only they needed it at the time, at certain times when -- especially when -- when the offensive were. And indeed, after a short time, the German army ran out of railroads. And they had to take -- they didn't have any more fall lines going back and forth in the place where we were, but to fix two lines, they had to -- to stop other places. So it was of a help.

Q: Through this contact with Moscow, did you have much information on what was happening in the war, or what was happening in Poland?

A: No, not much, not much. We only wanted to know every f -- we were -- we could only hear a -- that the army approaches, that it is closer, and that they -- we knew what was happening in Stalingrad, and -- and that Red army is coming close, and this is where our fear was, that we will not be able to survive it. It's ta -- especially remember in one of the villages, a girl was hit in the leg. And a -- a partisan was cleaning his -- his rifle, and accidentally shot, and hit a girl who will pass by, and she happened to be a -- a girl -- a Jewish girl from Moscow. And we took her to our hospital in the for -- into the forest, where we sho -- she was recuperating. And I remember the -- we were all afraid and she re -- and she wi -- or da -- will she be able to survive, she cannot walk, and -- but everything turned out well, and she siz -- I saw her going back to Moscow.

Q: So I'll let you continue here.

A: So when we joined the -- when we joined in the Red army, we were ap -- certain grou -- certain people remained. The guy who was in charge of the -- of the -- there was a Jewish guy who was in -- in charge of several villages. As I mentioned we were in the villages, and -- and there were Jewish -- and there were partisan commanders of the religious and so on. He lay -- stayed for -- they formed the local, future government of the area. And the remaining all -- the whole group joined the -- the -- the army. And I was sort -- separated from most of the people because I broke my glasses. And I waited for a pair of glasses to get -- to come in. So they all went to the front, and I stayed, waited, and I joined after that, another group, and -- when my glasses came. After a certain time, I remember we were in Prussia, the -- I met this Abrusha with whom I es-escaped from the first -- and who -- with whom I joined this -- the group. And I still remember he was already a lieutenant in the army, advanced. And I called him [indecipherable] he was, Abrusha, Abrusha. And he looked at me. He said, "I am not Abrusha any more, I am now Alexander." So a -- a Jewish guy did not want to be called Abrusha, always wanted to be Alexander. But he was a advanced as a lieutenant, and was with the army. And I went till -- Berlin with the army, till when the war was over. The first Americans I met there. Unfortunately I did not know English, I couldn't speak. And there were very few Jewish guys whom I could speak Yiddish with, fluently.

Q: Did you have -- when you were with the Soviet army, I mean, were there skirmishes, what were you doing?

A: Oh, in the fights? No, I was at that time put, because of my glasses, not in the front line, but in the second line. So I was in -- after cleaning up various places, blowing up remaining, cause they did not want to have any ammunition left so the Poles will not use them, or the -- the Germans will not use them like we do. Although germ -- most of the Germans escaped, or were sent out. Were no Germans when we came to Prussia, there --

there -- it was German free. So I was not really on the first line any more. And -- and after that in Berlin I was told I can go in May 1945, I can go back.

Q: Did you liberate Berlin?

A: I did not fight for Berlin actually, but I was there when -- when Berlin was [indecipherable], a week later I was there.

Q: What was it like?

A: It was like any city, a lot of German people, and [indecipherable]. I remember I stayed in Salendorf, and they were like a-all other, any other German. They did not pretend that they did not know, I did not try to talk to them about the Jews. They were trying to survive, also, cause everything -- was a shortage of everything.

Q: How did you feel?

A: Oh, I -- I felt elated that I am in the city. When I walked, I say, hey not enough -- not enough houses were destroyed. Was not enough bomb -- not enough bombs fell.

Q: But all of these years you spent in the forest, before that in a ghetto, did you ri -- did you ever think you'd see that day?

A: I -- no, I -- I -- as a matter of fact, I remember when I was in the forest, I dreamt about will I be ever -- will -- will there come a day when I'll be able to walk not in mud, but on -- on -- on concrete, or on asphalt? I couldn't believe that this will come. So this -- here -- I saw it was hey, it came. I didn't believe that -- that the day will come, that I'll survive it.

Q: What were your sort of initial thoughts or plans, once you were essentially free?

A: Some were -- to see -- get back to -- to -- with the family, and take them out for -- from Rakichenka, from the frost -- from the frost, from the cold air, and start a new life. How it will be, I did not know. I hoped it will be able, maybe, since my sister was in -- and uncle, my mother's grandparents were in -- in Palestine already, in Israel. I thought, hey, maybe we'll go there, if we'll be able to. So this was the idea of coming back. First to go out from everybody, and the -- there Russians were organizing trains, group of people who survived, and -- in Russia, and were going into Poland. And on certain stations these trains stopped, and I used to go out there, where are you from, where are you from? Is there anybody from such place, such pla -- we used to go in to meet and talk, and everybody was trying to start a new life, what will be, I -- nobody knew. They brought us to Stettin, which was -- which was a German city emptied of Germans, but were Poles brought in. And they brought also Jews from -- from Russia. And as -- f-first time I saw again anti-Semitism, again. Openly were anti-Semitism. And I always thought -- regretted, hey why did I return my -- my pistol? Why didn't I keep the pistol I took from

the first German officer I killed? Till a certain time, we were s-several months in -- in Stettin, and I heard that people are being moved, and moving out more east to Germany. And I -- accidentally I saw something written in the -- in Hebrew, on a -- and it was astonishing [indecipherable] in Hebrew, I went in, and I saw people were speaking Hebrew, and they ask me why I [indecipherable] I'm a former partisan [indecipherable]. They ask me if I can help them get a train, that they have 70 children, and they would like to get a train to Kraków from Stettin, north to south. And I told them I'll try, if -- but if, then I would like also to be moved with my family. And they said it's a deal. And I had no difficulty, just mentioning in the local office, the names from Berlin, whom I knew from -- who were in charge of -- big shots in the government, if -- I asked them if I should -- if they can arrange for me, or should I call comrade so and so. And they said, "Hey, how do you know them?" I said, "Oh, we were fighting together." Said, "Oh. Next week will be okay?" They were waiting already for two months for a -- for -- and couldn't get. Said, "Will be great." Next week there was a train. So they ask me if I can be with the children till they come -- until -- till Kraków. I told them, okay, I will, and -- and this is where I -- when I heard already that Jewish people are being killed on the trains. This is where I regretted that the Polish partisan were stopping trains and killing Jews and Russians. And a matter of fact, one guy who survived the war from Berlin -- from Minsk ghetto, and he was killed when he -- he came to his hometown to visit. Survived partisans and then came, he was killed by Poles. But this was the way how we - - they took my two sisters to one way, and my mother, brothers, and my sister and me went the other way. We came to Berlin, and we were in a DP camp.

Q: Wait, I'm getting confused. First -- did you go to kra -- you went to Kraków?

A: I went to Kraków, went back, and -- and a few days later, we were transferred. But my two sisters were taken, they say that they -- they don't -- cannot take so many people to -- to Berlin, so they were taken through the south, and they ended up after that, I found out, in Austria. And my mother, two brothers, and my sister and me were in -- no in, not sister -- were in -- yes, one sister -- were in ber -- in -- ended up in Berlin, and we were in to -- taken into a DP camp.

Q: Okay, but before this happened, didn't you have to go -- how did your mother get there? I mean, didn't you have to go find her or something? I mean, how did all of a sudden your family get together again?

A: Oh, we were -- from Russia we came, the whole family came by train to Stettin. So in Stettin we were all together. We were after that separated, the two sisters had -- to -- t -- the Bricha took them to another place, and they ended up in -- in Austria. And we are remaining where in Berlin. And by our letters we found out, because we both wrote to Israel to my sister and back, and we found out that they are there.

Q: So before you went to Stettin, you -- your -- your mother had come -- your parents had come over from -- from that town in the Urals?

A: Yes, I -- this is where I went to to take them out. I said that I went --

Q: Oh, you didn't describe that, I'm sorry. I -- you told me about that before the interview, but I don't think you've described that, so --

A: At the end of the war, I went there [indecipherable] this was May, '95.

Q: '45.

A: '45. I went to -- I went -- I wa -- I was let go -- I ca -- you can go where, and I had tickets to go to Rakichenka. But on the way, I st -- I went to Moscow, because my sister and brother-in-law, they were working in the Polish embassy in Moscow. So I stay with them one month, and then I ended up -- this was in the meantime, June -- July, I ended up going back to Rakichenka, September, and I came to -- the train came 10 kilometer before Rakichenka, and it was stopped, because in s -- in September it was -- there was three feet snow. I tried to walk, since I was accustomed to walking, and -- and snow, but it was too difficult, and I didn't know where to go, so I remember that in this place, there were once pol -- Polish Jews living in a certain house, I went there and knocked. Sure enough they were still there, and they knew that I am supposed to come, cause they knew my sister who was a nurse, who helped nursing as their -- their father when he was sick. So I stayed with them, and the next day I -- I walked to Rakichenka. And it took several months till the papers were ready. They were ready to give me my job back at the -- at the construction company where I worked. They heard that I came back, that I -- if I want to work at doing things, I want to go back to Poland. And to let -- they were organize trains with refugees, with Jew -- Jewish people, and Polish people. They were all in the meantime also Polish people in this place, who were forced. And I remember they came to me, if I can help -- they organized a Polish school there, if I can help them teach math. And I said okay. So then -- so I was teaching there mathematics in this -- in this school. Arithmetic, actually, till we could -- all went back to Poland. They stayed in Kraków -- they went to Kraków, and we went Stettin.

Q: Well it's just kind of amazing that you really were able to reconnect with most of your family.

A: Yeah.

Q: It's unusual, I think.

A: Yes, unfortunately, my brother-in-law and sister were -- my brother-in-law was looking for his little girl, and he couldn't find her. The place was closed, the orphanage, and he found one who worked in the orphanage there, and she said allegedly that she passed away.

Q: And your father?

A: My father got a har -- heart attack and passed away in -- in there, in Russia. And he her -- he did not know even that I am alive, because he thought he lost my sister and me and then -- and another brother of mine, and sister passed away over there also. My brother was drowned where he worked in Russia, and my sister passed away, the oldest. So my father after that got a heart attack. And they couldn't believe it when -- because at first -- there's a first pilot that landed in -- in our Malabotska forest, I send with him a letter. And he send it to them, and they couldn't believe it, that I am alive. And after that they got letter also, from my sister, and my brother-in-law what they came over. So this how we got contact again.

Q: So you and your mother, and I'm not sure who else, went to this DP camp in Berlin?

A: Yes, my two brothers, and -- and my two brothers, yeah, they went in a DP camp. And in '48, I started to look a -- I heard that there are some people who start to -- to go to university in Berlin. I said hey, I'll try. Went, applied, passed the exam and was accepted. So I started to study in '48. In '49, they closed the camp.

Q: What was living in the camp like?

A: Oh, here was already a Jewish organization, because they were all Jews in the camp. And there was a -- a Jewish local paper we were getting out, and Jewish school organized, Jewish physicians, and it was everything Jewish already.

Q: Were there camp survivors there?

A: There were some, but most of them were like -- like -- people like my -- from Russian Jews, and je -- Polish Jews from Russia who survived the war.

Q: When you first started to learn -- how did y -- when you first started learning about what had happened in -- in Poland, primarily, but certainly west of where you were --

A: Yeah, this was when I was in the -- in the Russian army, started to read, and -- and I came to various cities, and nowhere were Jews. As a matter of fact, I even passed as a soldier our city, Plasnich. Came in -- we were supposed to go in toward Prussia, which was -- Prussia was near the border. So I asked my officer a -- if I can go in, so he went with me. I am interested. And I saw a neighbor in the street, and I stopped him, how are you, and -- and I asked him, whose -- who is here, if any Jews survived, he said no. And he told me there is only one Jewish guy who survived, and -- and he was hidden by a Polish girl, who he married after that. So there were no Jews. So I couldn't stay long. And I went and never -- never went back. And I didn't want after that to go back to Poland, because all the cities we passed, no Jews. The first Jewish guys I saw was in -- in -- in Berlin. I was walking once on the street, and somebody s -- pass by, and said umhoit? And I looked at

him -- in the beginning, I -- and then I thought, hey, umhoit means in Hebrew, your folk -
- your -- your -- your people, your folk. I -- I said yes [indecipherable]. He said yes he's a
-- a survivor of here, and he thought that I am Jewish, so he -- where he is, he told me
there is here a group of people who survived the war, and I don't know -- he didn't know
yet what -- what will be, this was in -- m -- in the beginning, when ber -- when Berlin was
taken. I remember I had a can -- a can with me of -- we were getting American food in
cans, was -- and I had it, and I gave it to him. Oh, he thanked me. And this was the first
time when I saw a Jewish person after the war. And I -- at that time I realized what --
what happened, and -- and I was near Berlin, was some kind of a camp, I don't remember
today, and I -- I was there a few -- few minute, I could not be -- until -- for a long time I
could not hear anything about Holocaust, because I've had -- when I -- I had mentioned
to you during -- I -- later when I -- when I was a student at the Berlin University, for a
long time I could not -- I had -- for a week or two weeks that I did not sleep at all, that
each time either Gorajetski was chasing me and shooting at me again, or I was chasing
Germans, and I couldn't sleep. And it happened also in the United States in the
beginning, too. And I cut off all contact with my former friends, and -- with whom I
studied in Berlin, and -- and it went away, and it cured me. So when the DP camp was
liquid -- closed in Berlin because of the -- it was approaching, I believe the --
encirclement of Berlin, berl Berlin -- blockade of Berlin, they took out all the people
towar -- to West Germany, but I st -- I came back because of -- because of I want to -- I
started to study, so I wanted to continue, that's all. And I had an abur -- ability to -- a
Jewish group started to build in -- in -- in Berlin, so I was a -- earning a little money by
teaching Hebrew, and -- and I didn't pay for most of the -- for college. For I thought a -- I
will never have such conditions to -- to -- to continue, and so I'll stay. So I stayed to
graduate.

Q: Were you in -- in university with German students, with --

A: Mostly German student, and most of the students were -- were former soldiers. Matter of
fact, during lunch hour -- after that this was post-graduation study. We used to eat, our
group, always together lunch -- eat lunch together, and I used to sit -- mostly there were
two girls, with the girls, because there we -- the men were always talking about the war,
certain aspect of the war. And once the assistant professor came in, and he started to --
and he said, I remember, oh, in 1942, it was -- yeah, four -- no, '43, he is -- finally
received permission to go back, and he wanted to go for Christmas home. But when he
came to eastern Europe, and the darn partisan blew up his train. And he couldn't -- he did
not reach. And I asked him, "Herr Doctor, when was it?" And he said the -- a date, and he
started to describe what happened. I said, "It wasn't like this." I said, "It was the different
way." And he said, "Somewhere, how do you know what happened to me in 1943, over
there?" "So, because it was me who put the mine and blew the train up." "What, do you
kill Germans?" I said, "Yes, killed many of them." They ca -- didn't want to believe. And
he said, "You have to go -- to come," -- this was also before Christmas, "you have to
come and meet my wife, and tell -- tell her." And I still remember she asked me else,
"What would have been if you had met at that time?" And I told her, "I don't know if I

would have survived, but your husband would have been dead.” I said, “Because every German who approached the place where we were sitting, we kept him on our -- nothing -- he would have been dead. If we would have survived after that, I don’t know, but the first thing is we would have shot him.” Just was -- I remember that encounter because this was a special case where we were all trying to blow up a train, and suddenly -- usually we were blowing up trains going to the front, and s-suddenly we heard somebody hey, a group of partisans, unknown to us, were sitting about a mile away, and they blew up the train, who were going to -- toward east. And they were full of Germans after that on the railroad, and we didn’t know, we could not go there, try to -- to take it out, straighten the mine out, and we didn’t know what to do. And suddenly a t -- a train started to come in the other direction. So I said, “To hell with it, we’ll blow up this one.” Rather than -- than leave the mine, or -- so this is how this was a peculiar case. And we blew up the train coming from the front, to in -- where he was sitting.

Q: What about -- I mean, just in general your relationship with German students? I mean, your feeling toward them, how they treated you?

A: No, whenever I met a German, the first -- the first -- unconsciously the first question was how many women, how many children did he kill? And so this was my relationship toward. I knew I am here for a purpose, in order to get a degree, and -- and get out. I did not develop any close friendship with anyone, no one. Especially when I considered they were all Nazis, because after that, during the Nuremburg trials, I remember two other guys were in the -- in my lab, and we started to talk, and they said, “Yavolt, we lost the war, so they are suing our -- our leaders. Had we won, we would have sued the American leaders.” From this attitude, I’ll never forget this. I considered that they are -- in heart that they are all Nazis.

Q: Did you experience any, sort of blatant anti-Semitism after the war?

A: After the war, no. Only my attitude was to resist, especially when I heard such and such a professor, oh yes, he published a book, but he stole everything from -- from a Jewish book, which was from a Jewish professor of o -- at least this is what I was told. So whenever I went before a -- before a -- as I said, examination, I was always sleepless. But I managed to -- to -- my first room I rented, I was -- I rented in a Russian girl -- in a Russian lady. Why? Because I wanted to find if they know anything about a person named Gorajetski, because I thought, if I’ll find Gorajetski, he’ll not -- he’ll not live long if I’ll find. But they did not know anything. And after that I was with a -- another family who were very nice to me, they cooked for me, treated me nicely.

Q: A German family?

A: German family.

Q: What did you study?

- A: I studied chemistry, and afterwards I received a PhD in chemistry. And when I came -- visited Israel, and I asked for a job, they told me, "We have so many chemists that you can put the," [indecipherable] that -- like tar on their -- "you can pave the streets with them". So I said -- and my sister was -- and brother-in-law, they got a job in the Washington embassy. And when they were told to go back, they asked for asylum, and stayed here. So they wrote me, "Come here, come to -- to United States." So I started to study English, and after a few months English, I came to the United States.
- Q: This was when?
- A: 1956. And I got one job in Massachusetts, was there for a year and a half, and after that, the central laboratories were in Philadelphia, so I moved to Philadelphia, because in a small place in Massachusetts, there was nothing for a single person to do. I used to go drive to New York. And my sister live in Washington, I thought, hey, Philadelphia is in the between. So I moved to Philadelphia, and since then I am in Philadelphia.
- Q: Now, for -- since all of this time, you've gotten married, you've raised a family.
- A: Oh, I -- I was going every -- from to -- since my mother was in -- in Israel, and my two brothers were in Israel, [indecipherable] f -- in '48, my two brothers volunteered to go to fight for Israel. And they went, and they volunteered. They asked me to come with them, and I said, "No, I had enough, one war. And I am now studying, I am not -- I'll not leave till I graduate." So I used to go to visit, and I -- from here I was going to visit my mother and brothers there. And on one of the visits, I me -- met my wife, we got married, and sh -- t -- I brought her -- brought them here -- brought her here. I tried to get a job there, I couldn't. Although she always says that I didn't try hard enough. And now, my two children were born here. One is a physician, the other is a lawyer. So we -- we are here.
- Q: When you first came over here, was there a -- an adjustment period?
- A: Oh yes. I cannot say that I felt immediately a member of -- of the group, it was always -- actually, it was always they. Americans, they Americans. American Jews, they American Jews. It was never we, for a long, long, long time. I did not ber -- belong to any group. Because I felt always to be that I am an outsider, all the time. I don't know, this -- this is what happened then, during the war.
- Q: Was it lonely, or --
- A: Yes. That's what always, it -- my life was unique, it was different than everybody else's. As a matter of fact, and even when -- even Philadelphia I saw there is a group of Holocaust survivors, and the first -- I went only once to a meeting of, and I saw a -- these were mostly people who were -- who survived somehow in Russia somewhere, or ot --

not they -- they did not had to fight for their life, as I did, so I -- so they -- it's not the same group as I did.

Q: Did people -- did you talk about your past?

A: No, I tried -- I talked very little. This is the reason why my daughter is here, she wanted to hear -- hear what, because whenever there was -- they mentioned in television the Holocaust, I went out. I did not -- only once or twice I talked -- gave a talk in -- in the synagogue, about Jewish partisans, or -- and actually, I was not in a typically Jewish partisan, I was a partisan.

Q: Did Americans -- people who were already here -- care? Did they want to know?

A: Some found it interesting, but as a whole, not specially.

Q: And you didn't want to talk about it?

A: And I didn't want to talk, no.

Q: How long do you think it took you to sort of feel more comfortable with thinking about it, and talking about it?

A: Oh, I would say till -- till about a few years ago. Took me a long time. And this is why I was often in Israel, but the first time I went to see Yad Vashem was last year. And this Holocaust museum, only -- only now that I saw it. Because the memories were too painful. I have seen too many dead children, too many women killed.

Q: You basically reestablished yourself with success. How much do you think that those war experiences impacted you, and -- and can you kind of talk about in what way they sort of, affected you, in the way you've lived your life?

A: I don't know, I -- I wa -- I -- I believe that I became very regre -- regressive, so ha -- I d -- I didn't talk. The first time that I talking about it openly now is -- is -- is now, here. I tried always to -- not to talk about it, to hide it, to hide everything what happened to me. I don't know why, but because it hurt. I still hate certain areas in j -- and I -- I didn't mention about this that when I was a student, immediately after Israel was created, I asked my sister to send me how just Jewish money looked like. And she sent me one shekel, a five shekel bill, and a 10 or 20, I don't remember. And at that -- at that time, one -- one shekel was five dollars, so for me this was a fortune, so much money. But she send it to me, and I saw each time, whenever I couldn't sleep, I looked at the money, because the money had on the other side, a Star of David. And the Star of David, which was used during the war as a star to deg -- as a sign to degrade people, suddenly here was on the money, and it was -- so I -- when I looked at it, I say, "Oh, I'll finished -- in a few more years I'll graduate, and I'll get away, get out from -- from -- from this country, from

Germany.” And each time I kept it with me, with -- the money. When my mother was supposed to go to Israel, this was during the blockade of Berlin, I -- and she was in West Germany, I wanted to go to say good-bye to her, to say to -- in -- but when I went -- I had onl -- the only way how to go was, for me, was by a plane. From anybody from [indecipherable]. So I wanted to buy a ticket, they told me no, I am -- I am a for -- I am not a German. So how do I pay? Said, “You cannot pay this with foreign -- with dollars, because you are not a r -- a real foreigner.” I cannot get a ticket. So there was another guy living also at a Polish Jew in my -- in my house, I ask him, “How do Jewish people travel to -- to West Germany?” To -- the shortest distance was to Hanover. He told me there is here a foreign -- a foreigner -- a real foreigner. He told me buy dollars on the Black Market, and he told me where I can buy dollars, and 20 dollars for him. And for 20 dollars, he will pay for you. And then you’ll be able to go. So, I went to him, he said yes, he’ll do it. I bought, I don’t remember how -- remember how many dollars, was in 20 dollars for him. I pay -- and he paid for me a t-ticket, and I came on the plane from Berlin, and I remember they called me in. “You are a smuggler.” I had to undress, and they -- the British, that’s what it -- the British part of Berlin. And they checked me, they looked for me. And at that time I figured, hey, I should have had like -- like with the German maybe, to put something on my legs -- on my -- in my -- so that they’ll not touch [indecipherable]. Because they found in my wallet this -- this money, this Israeli money, they took it away from me. I’ll never forget it till today I remember the British. They took away because I’m a smuggler. I was the only wa -- only Jew on the -- on the -- on the plane, and the only smuggler. And I lost the money. If I had known that they will, ah, I could have hidden it in a book or somewhere. I was in -- in trying to smuggle in things, I was a specialist, I knew how to do it. I didn’t expect it. But I’ll never forget the British for it.

Q: What I wanted to ask you about at this point, is sort of, kind of general, more personal and philosophical sort of reactions to your experience, and I think how it formed you after the war. We can do one of two things, we can, you know, probably for another half hour at the most. We can stop and take lunch, and do this afterwards if you’d like, or what -- however -- whatever you’d like to do. And we can take a break.

A: Okay.

Q: Would you like to do that, and then just come back for a half hour or so?

A: Yes, yes, I will --

Q: When you come ba --

A: I will see what they do over there at [indecipherable]

End of Tape #3

Tape #4

- Q: Just wanted to pick up a little bit with how these experiences during the war impacted you after the war.
- A: It took me a long time to forget that the war is over, and I tried always to remind me, Sam, the war is over. For instance, whenever somebody asked me a question, automatically I was thinking, is it better to -- to answer in this way, or the other way. A simple thing. How old are you? I was always automatically thinking -- thinking -- thinking, should I say I'm five years older, or should I say I'm few years younger? I never thought about tell the truth, because always I thought a -- what is better? Is it in this situation better to be younger, or is it to be older? And on any question like this, I never - - automatically I did -- my -- my head worked in this way, which answer is better, not what is the truth, to answer truly. And after that, I realized, Sam, the war is over, you can tell the truth. And took me a long time, till I overcame this thinking, that you can answer, there is no danger any more.
- Q: Now, wa -- was this because you always had to manipulate the truth? Was this because you didn't trust people?
- A: Oh, both. Mostly it was because to manipulate was better. In some places it was better to be younger, let's say, cause then you'll be able -- in other places was better to be older, then there -- then you can do in ghetto. These things still remained, and I -- as I said, this was automatic with me. I had to fight to -- to a -- you can tell the truth, there -- they -- there is no danger any more. Because still I was thinking there is a danger in -- in -- lurking somewhere. And I had to fight this myself to answer the truth, to tell the truth. To forget about it.
- Q: What else?
- A: Also trusting people. It was very difficult to. Somehow you have to real -- I had to rea -- you have to rely on yourself, not to trust other people. Took me also a long time to. And even -- even making friends. I believe this was all the results of bitter experiences.
- Q: Do you think that your sort of priorities, your values maybe are different because of what you went through? Or were shaped by what you went through?
- A: No, the priorities was always -- first thing was safety. Automatically I was think, hey, what is safer? In anything what I did. From walking somewhere, to -- to going for trips. Safety was always the first thing I was la -- I was thinking of.
- Q: To an extreme?
- A: To -- even to extremes. But it a --

Q: Do you feel safe now?

A: Yes. Now this went away. But took me -- it took me time to -- to overcome it, because I was recognizing myself, hey, there is no danger Sam, any more. You -- and I talking to myself, and I say, so the war is over, the war is over.

Q: Do you think that -- that your experiences affected the way you raised your children, or --

A: Not that I think now about it, although I -- I worried often about the safety, not saying anything maybe. But maybe I was overcautious in various area, I don't know. But it definitely -- I wa -- I was i -- always think, hey is this -- is it safe, can they go somewhere on a -- to a camp? Who will -- is it safe to be in the camp? And so on. I had to think it over. I di -- I didn't talk about it, but I was thinking to myself.

Q: What were some of the other difficulties in kind of adjusting to a new life?

A: I cannot think, because I had all the time -- had to adjust each time, to adjust to a different language, or to -- because in the beginning everything was -- let's say I was raised in Poland, Polish, and after that to adjust everything in Russian, then I was adjusting back to Polish, then to German, and after that were ex -- exa -- to -- to -- to English. And -- so it was adjusting was constantly. I was doing it all the time, till here I thought I am now -- I am here, I am an -- an American now.

Q: What about culturally here? You mentioned that you felt a bit apart, but -- but what else, anything?

A: This -- this -- I believe this was all the time that I belong to -- as I said I could not -- never say we, you're -- we are. In other word, for a certain group to say we, we belong. We Americans, or we -- because I was always -- considered myself, it is they, and I am different.

Q: Oh, okay.

A: And I probably did not overcome this.

Q: Are you -- are you religious now, or have -- di-did you raise your children Jewish?

A: Yes, we belong to a synagogue, and -- and actually it was -- in the beginning I could not go to a synagogue. In -- in Berlin, let's say whenever there was a Jewish holiday, I did not go to -- to -- simply to show a -- I am Jewish. And I used to go to the synagogue, but I was always outside, not going in -- in to -- to pray, because I understood Hebrew -- I understand Hebrew, I learned Hebrew. And whenever there was written, God is full of mercy, I could not see where -- where he was. I saw th -- the -- that children, and that --

that people. So, I could not pray for a long, long time. But after that, here, when I thought, yeah, if I will not go to a synagogue, and my wife wanted the children to be raised [indecipherable], if not, then they will become -- they'll stop being Jewish. So I agreed yes, we'll go to a synagogue, and we belonged to a synagogue since then, and we tried to raise our children Jewish.

Q: Is this important?

A: Yes. Yes, because this is a way how e -- how they can stay Jewish. In Poland you could be Jewish without being religious. In Israel you can be Jewish without being religious. But in the United States, if you don't belong to a synagogue, and you don't na -- then you stop being Jewish. So this is important.

Q: What do you think gave you, sort of the courage, and the strength to get through all of this?

A: In the beginning it was a will to survive, so see again my -- my parents. To see my brothers and sister. At a certain time it was -- a certain amount was a desire to re -- of revenge. And not only it was expected to me -- from me, I remember in the Red army, when we entered the first German village, and there were only a couple of old people remained in the village, how everybody else ran away. And the soldiers come me, "Sam, there are the -- they are still Germans, we should go kill them." And I asked them, [indecipherable] I say, should I? I told them, "Why should I kill them? They didn't do anything bad to me." They says, "You are Jewish, didn't they kill all Jews?" And I told them, "So, what do you want me to be like the -- like the German SS, do the same thing?" Within myself I saw a -- I cannot do what they did. So I had opportunity to kill Germans, but I couldn't do it. But there was a certain -- during the war, there was a certain amount of desire for revenge.

Q: Was there anything in your upbringing that kind of gave you the s -- the strength you needed to -- to get through this? Were there things that you thought about while you were fighting, or that you dreamed about?

A: No, I would not say this, because my father always wanted me to be kind, and -- and -- and -- and -- and understandable of other people need. No, I would not say that upbringing did it, it is the experience during the war which made me. It is only -- it was one thing that I -- when I was as a partisan walking through the -- at night sometimes, somewhere through the village, and I thought, hey, why did -- how come -- why -- why did not -- I not have a rifle when I was in ghetto? I would have felt differently. That it will cost somebody s-something to kill me, that they cannot kill just people for -- for nothing, and without paying any -- a price for it. So this -- and this is sometimes left -- sometimes when I think about people here having so mu -- so mu -- rifles, and they causing here death, I still sometimes think a -- but if Jews had rifles during -- in 1939, many more Germans would have paid with their life, or Ukrainians for -- for killing

them. So it's -- it affects today my thinking that I am not so against -- so much against the National Rifle Organization as may be if I would have not had my experience.

Q: What else did you think about while you were in the forest?

A: Oh, if I was thinking, I -- it was a dream that I -- that I will one day be sitting here in -- and answer question and tell stories about it. I never believed that such a day will come. I thought I am destined to be killed, but I want to pay a price -- that they pay a price for killing me. But I didn't believe that I'll survive.

Q: Did you think about your family when you were in the woods, or --

A: Oh, always. They were always close and I was thanking God that we did not have my -- money -- enough money so the whole family will go to -- to Minsk, otherwise I would have not been able to -- to run away and then -- and this is what happened to a lot of young people who stayed, did not go away because they could not leave their mothers or -- or fathers. Because very often, they were supplying the food, you know, for the -- temporarily to s -- to survive, even -- even when a lot of people were hungry, but still the young people were those who were helping them. And a lot of them could not go away and leave their parents, or brothers and sisters. So I thank God that -- that it -- that only -- that only I was the one who went to Minsk, and they stayed far back.

Q: Are there certain, or were there, I guess, certain things that happened to you here that would evoke certain memories, whether it was a smell, or a sound, or something someone said that all of a sudden would make you think back to these difficult experiences? Certain things that just bring out these memories?

A: Not particularly, except a few days ago, I was to a meeting where a professor from China gave a -- a speech at Gratts College in -- in -- it's a Jewish college in -- in Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. And he spoke that they wanted to -- to learn about Jews, and Jewish culture, and so on, because Jews have influence everywhere about -- in -- in -- in money and so on. And -- and a -- in business and so on. And I thought, hey, where did I hear that Jews have all these influence, worldwide influence? It was in the shtillmer where I read it. So these kind of thing I wanted to ask, but then --

Q: And maybe he was just being complimentary?

A: Yes, that they want to get acquainted with Jewish culture, and so on, so [indecipherable], and he gave this as a reason, but there was [indecipherable] yet. Jews could not help effect t-to -- to bomb Auschwitz, or -- or -- or other things li-like this, and -- or -- or influence the British to let Patria, and -- and -- and what is the name, the -- the two ships which were blown up after that? People tried to escape, and come to Israel. They didn't have the influence at that time, but now, suddenly they have the influence.

Q: What else? Is there anything that you -- that you want to add? I have a good question for you. Did -- did working with all of those -- those mines, make you -- make you a better chemist?

A: No, I -- but I understood after that what I -- actually I did not want to be a -- as a young man, I did not want to be a chemist. As a young man, I loved math, and I wanted to be a mathematician. In high school whenever -- every -- we had a free lessons, I used to go to my math professor. They -- all the kids were go -- were -- went out to play basketball, and I told him, hey, we have a free time, can you give my -- give me a math problem and -- to solve? And I hoped one day to be a mathematician. But when I started -- and applied to college, I said hey, if I'll be a mathematician, what could it be? At that time the only thing what I could be is a teacher, in all, I did not want to be a teacher. Because I was earning money in high school by tutoring other people, and I thought, no, I don't want to do this. So close to it, science, I said, hey, chemistry -- chemistry, I -- maybe I'll be able one day to work in Vitezma Institute. So this influenced my decision to choose it. Yes, and after that I understood what I did during the war, how I blew up thing.

Q: That early experience with explosives, and it doesn't determine your future.

A: No, I became really not knowing much of chemistry especially is whenever it was needed -- needed to blow up things and we didn't have much TNT. I devised a method simply by taking -- putting together shells from -- from various -- various types of shells, and in between a small piece of TNT, and blowing up this TNT, and this TNT were causing all the shells to explode, and -- and take down the whole bridge. This is -- this was my -- my invention, how -- how to do it.

Q: You're in inventor. I don't think I have any other questions, unless there's anything that you'd like to add.

A: No, thank you, it was for me of interest to go, because I -- I wanted always to come, and I was fighting it, to go to see what do people want to see in the Holocaust Museum, and I saw so many people reading the various things, which most of them were known to me, but still it was of interest, the way it was presented.

Q: Well, I thank you for [indecipherable]

A: Thank you, and this can be of help to some -- to somebody, I am glad that I told it.

End of Tape #4

Conclusion of Interview