United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Joseph Gurwin
August 1, 2006
RG-50.030*0508

PREFACE

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JOSEPH GURWIN
August 1, 2006

Beginning Tape One

Question: Good morning, Mr. Gurwin.

Answer: Good morning, and how are you?

Q: I'm fine, how are you?

A: Great.

Q: It's great to see you. Tell me what -- what is your name?

A: My name is Joseph Gurwin.

Q: But that's not the name you were born with, is it?

A: No. The name I was born with was Joselis Gurbicius.

Q: Can you spell it?

A: Yes. G-u-r-b-i-c-i-u-s.

Q: That's your last name, and your first name?

A: That was my -- my first name was J-o-s-e-l-i-s.

Q: And where were you born?

A: I was born in Kovno, Lithuania.

Q: And the date?

A: June the 13th, 1920.

Q: But you didn't grow up in Kovno, did you?

A: No, I didn't.

Q: So --

A: I grew up in a city called Panevezys, or as we say in Jewish, Poinyavich.

Q: Poinyavich. So how come you were born in Kovno? Cause it's pretty far.

A: Well, it's about a few hours by train, but I think they had a better hospital in Kovno and the story goes that my father wanted to be sure that nothing goes wrong, so he took his wife, my mother, to Kovno.

Q: Well, let's talk a l -- some about your family life --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- in this town.

A: Yes.

Q: So, tell me your father's name please.

A: My father's name was Lipman, L-i-p-m-a-n. And my mother's name was Ethel, E-t-h-e-l.

Q: And you had an older brother?

A: I had a younger brother.

Q: Oh younger, okay

A: A younger brother. And his name is Chaim, C-h-a-i-m.

Q: And what did your dad do?

A: My dad was an exporter of flax, flax seeds, apples, ducks and geese and anything else that you could export.

Q: And was that a family business, or did he --

A: Well, it was his business.

Q: It was his -- but was it in the family before, or had -- did he --

A: I think he -- my father started that business.

Q: So did you grow up with these animals, the geese and the ducks?

A: Oh yes, we had many geese and ducks and I remember when he shipped them to Germany and there will be a parade of ducks and geese through the streets of Poinyavich from the assembly point to the railroad station.

Q: Really?

A: Tied up all the traffic. Wasn't much traffic, but whatever.

Q: Did your mother work in this business also?

A: Yes.

Q: And what did she do?

A: My mother was very much involved with my father, she would take care of paying the mercha -- the merchants or whatever. And she was also involved in managing my grandfather's wholesale grocery store.

Q: And that was her father?

A: That was her father.

Q: I see. And did your grandpa and grandma live in that little si -- town?

A: Yes, it wasn't such a little town --

Q: I -- wasn't so little --

A: -- it was about 23,000 people.

Q: It was?

A: Yes, and there were about 7,000 Jews in the town.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And there were a number of [indecipherable] in the town, and there was a Hebrew high school in town.

Q: So -- so one -- it was not so little.

A: It was not so little.

Q: Did your father's gram -- mother and father also live in that town?

A: My mother?

Q: No, your father's --

A: Yes.

Q: -- father and mother. So, was this a very close family?

A: We're a very close family.

Q: Were you well off?

A: My father was relatively well off, you know? It's -- it's by comparison. He -- as a matter of fact, he -- he was a director of the Lithuanian National Ba-Bank. He was very involved with the Lithuanian government in exporting all the flax and flax seed and so forth. And he spent a lot of time in Kovno where the government --

Q: Right.

A: -- functioned.

Q: Were you close with your father?

A: I was close to my father obviously. I can't even think of not being close to my parents.

Q: So tell me what that was like. Did you do a lot of things together, did you eat dinner together and have long conversations, what?

A: Well, first the -- my father's business was such that the end of the day, the people would come to the ha -- to our home to get paid for the merchandise that they delivered. And so I was involved in meeting all these people and listening to all these stories, and I was also familiar with the various telegrams that my father would get from over -- from Latvia, from England or Belgium, where offers were being made for ma -- for flax or whatever, and I would be involved

with converting it from their currencies, to our currency, which was the lit, l-i-t. And I was involved with my father in analyzing the flax seed, because flax seed is sold based upon the percentage of good seeds, less any defective ones or less any other things which got into the -- the seeds. So that you would have to analyze it and determine what percentage is flax seed. And you would have to weigh them, and you would have to pick out all the defective ones. So I have enjoyed it, and I have been involved with my father.

Q: So at what age did you start working with him and being involved in the business with him?

A: Well, the business, as I said, was always conducted from the house.

Q: Right.

A: So, from my childhood days, seven, eight, whatever, I had the opportunity to observe him in business.

Q: What was he like? What kind of a guy was he?

A: Well --

Q: How do you remember him?

A: I remember him as a very respected citizen of the city. He was a Orthodox, but not that Orthodox that he wouldn't occasionally break the laws. He traveled a lot. He was very good in business, and he was very respected.

Q: Did he play with you?

A: Not really.

Q: Oh.

A: Not really. Occasionally, maybe once or twice, he would accompany me to a soccer game, but it was not that kind of a relationship in Lithuania at the time between parents and children.

Q: Right. And what about your mother, what was she like?

A: My mother was a very warm and a very caring person, and she helped my father in the business. And she also made sure that my father's family, for instance, would have sufficient money to make a Shabbat and she would go out and buy for them and bring it to their homes. She was a -- you know, a very wonderful person.

Q: Did she play with you, or was this not a relationship parents had with kids?

A: It was not that kind of relationship where parents played with the children.

Q: Did you ea --

A: You played primarily with your friends.

Q: Right.

A: You did not play with your parents.

Q: Did your mother cook?

A: Oh yes, my mother cooked, but we had servants in the house that did the heavy work. And -- but my mother cooked and my mother baked.

Q: And is -- was -- did you have a favorite food?

A: Did I have a fav -- yeah, oh sure, a lot of the food. I remember the tzimmes.

Q: [indecipherable]

A: -- on a Friday night. And I me -- I remember the cholent on Saturday, and you had to go to the baker and bring it, about 12 o'clock. [phone ringing]

Q: We have a phone, so we're going to stop the tape. Are we ready? Are we back? Okay. So was your family religious? When you -- you said that there was in some sense we -- you were religious, tell us --

A: Well yes, my family was religious, my mother kept a kosher home. I recall going to shul with my father every Friday night, and every Saturday morning, and obviously every holiday. We

celebrated all the holidays and my grandfather was very religious and he spent most of his time studying in the synagogue?

Q: And this was your father's father, or your mother's father?

A: My mother's father.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I don't remember -- I'm -- ma -- whether my father's father was also studying, but I remember he had a long beard, and I would have assumed that he would have observed the kashrut laws and everything else.

Q: Now you said your father did not obey all the laws, that he wasn't -- what did you mean?

A: Well, there were occasions in his business, which would require him to travel maybe on a Shabbat.

Q: Uh-huh. And he would do that?

A: And he would do that because he had no choice --

Q: Right.

A: -- a -- in order to get home on whatever, that he would sort of overlook that particular commandment.

Q: Right, right. What -- what kind of a house or apartment -- I don't know what you had, did you have a -- a house that you lived in?

A: We had an apartment and it was a two story building and we lived on the second floor and we were one of the few apartments that had running water, it had a toilet inside the apartment and it had a shower and a bathtub inside the apartment. And as a result, many of the relatives would come to the apartment to take a bath or a shower, or whatever.

Q: And what sort of a neighborhood? Was it primarily a Jewish neighborhood or was it a mixed neighborhood?

A: Yes, it was primarily a Jewish neighborhood out of the -- as a -- I don't know whether I mentioned it, the pa -- total population of that city was approximately 20,000 or 22,000, there were approximately 7,000 Jews. So the Jews were primarily the merchants in town as well as the craftsmen.

Q: Uh-huh. When you went to school, did you like school?

A: Well, you really had -- didn't have much of a choice whether you liked it or not. You just went to school, I'm -- I attended a Hebrew gymnasium where all the subjects were taught in modern Hebrew.

Q: Really?

A: Yes. So that for instance, if I had to translate Latin, I would translate Latin into Hebrew and vice versa. And math, sciences and whatever, physics, chemistry were all taught in modern Hebrew, like they do teach them today in Israel.

Q: Was that unusual in -- in --

A: Well, there were several schools like that. There was one school in our town and there was another school in Kovno, and there was another school I know in Shaul -- Shaulenay --

Q: Mm-hm.

A: -- which is another city. And -- and then there were [indecipherable] where many of the religious young Jewish boys attended. They even built a school for the girls called Gavna, where the girls could attend a modern Hebrew high school.

Q: Did -- did you learn modern Hebrew before you went to school, or you learned it when you started school? This -- you started at --

A: I presume -- I presume -- I'm trying to think back.

Q: Yeah.

A: I guess I learned it in school.

Q: And you started in the school as -- in kindergarten, is it --

A: In kindergarten --

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And school had -- you would spend t -- in order to graduate, I guess you would spend 12 years in school.

Q: Right. So I know that you had to go to school.

A: Yes.

Q: But did you like it?

A: Certain subjects I loved.

Q: So what did you love?

A: I loved math, I loved science. I -- I loved history. The subjects that I didn't like were languages.

Q: You didn't like it?

A: No.

Q: So that school had to be tough on you because you had to translate everything?

A: Yes. Right, and I had to study Latin and I had to study Lithuanian and German, and fortunately for me, I failed Lithuanian and Latin.

Q: You failed?

A: Failed.

Q: Now why was that --

A: It was a failure.

Q: You were --

A: And I failed Lithuanian and Latin because basically Latin, you have to spend a lot of time studying and memorizing. And I used to play a lot of soccer with my friends and studying languages was not exactly my forte. So as a result, I failed Lithuanian and Latin. And people would ask me, well how could you fail Lithuanian when you lived in Lithuania? I said, it's very simple. To me Lithuanian was like a foreign language because at home we spoke Yiddish.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: In school we spoke Hebrew.

Q: Right.

A: The only time I would have occasion to speak Lithuanian, if I went to some kind of government office, whether it's a bank, or a post office. But otherwise I really didn't have much occasion to speak Lithuanian, so Lithuanian was like another foreign language.

Q: So you didn't have fr-friends outside of the Jewish community then, so the kids you were with spoke -- did you speak Yiddish with the kids?

A: All the kids that I associated with attended the Hebrew gymnasium, which I did.

Q: So what did you speak together, Hebrew, or --

A: Either Hebrew or Yiddish.

Q: So you were good at soccer? You liked it a lot.

A: Oh, soccer I liked a lot.

Q: Yeah. Did you play every day?

A: Practically.

Q: Yeah? Were you on a team?

A: Yes, I was on the Maccabee team.

Q: And?

A: And as a matter of fact I remember traveling to Kovno and some other cities, where we played soccer against they -- their teams.

Q: And you would play against the other Hebrew school teams, I gather, right?

A: Right, right.

Q: So, the World Cup is a big deal to you, I suppose [indecipherable] right?

A: A very big deal, I been watching it.

Q: Yeah.

A: I enjoyed it very much.

Q: Right.

A: I sometimes feel when I'm watching it like I'm ready to push or pull or run.

Q: Yeah, right. Tell me, you said it was lucky that you failed Lithuanian and --

A: Latin.

Q: -- Latin. Why was that lucky? Didn't they do something to you if you failed?

A: Yes. As a result of my failure of Lithuanian and Latin, I was left back in grade for a whole year.

Q: Which grade?

A: It was -- I was then probably 13.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So it must have been like sixth grade, and as a result I went to school with kids that were a year younger than I was. Well, the disgrace, the humiliation of going to school with kids who are a year younger than you are, was so devastating that I wanted to run away from home. But when

you're 16 years old, where you going to run? So I remembered that a couple years prior to that, my mother's brother, my uncle, visited his family, and he came from New York, and he stayed in my mother's apartment. And when he saw the housekeeper bring to my bed in the morning and in the evening, warm milk and cookies, he said to my mother, you are ruining that boy, he'll never amount to anything. You better send him with me to u -- to the United States. So now that I wanted to run away from home because of the humiliation of being left back in school, what do I do? I write my uncle. Now, I didn't think at the time that I would be able to get a visa as quickly as I did, but my uncle got busy and prepared the necessary affidavits, and he send them through HIAS to Kovno, and one day I got a call from HIAS Kovno that they received the affidavits and the papers, and that the American counsel would like to see me. Well, I went to Kovno to meet the American counsel. And as you recall there was a depression in the United States in 1936 and the American counsel had like 17 visas to grant for the whole country. But when he saw my application, he figured I am not going to be a burden on the state because I have an uncle who is going to take care of me, I'm not going to take anybody else's job. So he grants me the visa immediately. Now frankly, I wasn't ready to go that soon. But having put my uncle to all the trouble of preparing all the necessary affidavits and -- and all my friends knew that I had wa -- a visa to the United State. It is -- it wasn't feasible for me to back out at that particular point in time. So I came to the United States and fortunately, I survived. If I had not failed Lithuanian and Latin, and if I didn't run away from Lithuania, I might have been one of the six million.

Q: Right.

A: And that's why I said to you I was very lucky that I failed Lithuanian and Latin.

Q: What did -- did you tell your mother and father that you were writing to your uncle?

A: Yes.

Q: And did they say why are you doing this, were they upset?

A: Well, my mother was supportive.

Q: She was?

A: Because it was her brother.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: My father wasn't exactly enamored with the idea, but my father was a businessman who traveled a lot, and he -- his attitude was, you go, you don't like it, you come back. We'll come to visit you, whatever. So it was not like a [indecipherable] thing.

Q: Yes.

A: It was like, you go to take advantage of the situation.

Q: Right. But let me go back before we leave Lithuania. You have a brother, Chaim.

A: Yes.

Q: And how much younger is he than you?

A: He is six years younger than I am.

Q: Six?

A: Six.

Q: So that's a big --

A: Difference.

Q: -- difference. So he's born in 1926.

A: Right.

Q: Were you close with him, or was the difference so big that --

A: We to -- the difference was so big, and I had my own friends and he had his own friends. So that we were together, but -- and we would go away on vacations together, but because of the difference in age, I gravitated to my age group and he did --

Q: To his.

A: -- to his age group.

Q: Right. Hm. Where did you go on vacations, before you left?

A: Well, I must admit that I went on my vacations to a place called Palangin, which is on the Baltic Sea. It's a beautiful resort, and we would stay in what they used to call in those days, a pensionne, which means you would get a room and you would get three meals a day. And so my pa -- in some years my parents rented a house in Palangin, and so we stayed in the house and brought a housekeeper and so forth and so on.

Q: And you liked it there?

A: I loved it there.

Q: Why?

A: Well, it -- it was going to the beach every day.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: It was in the -- it had magnificent trees adjoining the beach, pine trees, which is very unusual. And the path was lined with pine needles. And in the afternoon at four o'clock there would be an orchestra playing in the park. It was a very nice life. As a matter of fact there were, just before I came to the United States, I spent my last summer in Palangin.

Q: With your family?

A: With my family.

Q: Right. I think we'll stop the tape now.

End of Tape One

Beginning Tape Two

Q: I understand that you had another language, you spoke Russian?

A: Yes.

Q: How did that hap -- how did that happen?

A: Well, because my nurse was Russian, and so probably the first language that I have learned was Russian and Yiddish. Russian from the nurse and Yiddish from my parents.

Q: Do you still speak Russian?

A: I still speak Russian. I can understand Russian and can my -- can make myself understood in Russian. I-I don't speak a perfect Russian, but I manage to speak.

Q: So did you speak Russian all through your childhood, as well as Yiddish and Hebrew?

A: Yes. I mean, you ha -- because we might have had a Russian housekeeper, so I would have occasion to speak Russian to her. I would have occasion maybe to hear Russian spoken in the house while my mother may be speaking to somebody Russian. How my mother used to love to read books, and wa -- a lot of the books were in Russian.

Q: Now, how come your mother spoke Russian?

A: Because my mother was born in the former Soviet Union.

Q: I see.

A: And so she spoke Russian.

Q: Did your father understand Russian as well?

A: Yes. Ye -- most of -- most of the people in Europe speak a number of languages. As a matter of fact, besides Russian, I even spoke Polish. But it's not unusual for the Europeans to speak a number of languages. I recall when I came to the United States at -- at the age 16, well, I spoke Yiddish, I spoke Hebrew, I spoke Russian, German, Lithuanian, studied Latin and failed. But --

Q: You studied Lithuanian and failed also.

A: That's right.

Q: But you still could speak it some?

A: Yes. Actually, the reason I failed Lithuanian is because I didn't memorize a poem.

Q: Oh.

A: And the funniest part is, during the oral examination, they ask me to recite that poem, well I didn't remember. But now, what is it, 70 years later, I remember the poem.

Q: Really?

A: Yes. As a matter of fact, I can recite part of it. [recites poem in Lithuanian]. So that was one of the poems which I failed when I was tested orally.

Q: So how come you remember it now?

A: Because it left such an impression on me.

Q: What is the poem about?

A: This is the king of Lithuania calling his army together. And he tells them about the sounds of fire, and [indecipherable] and th -- and they should [indecipherable] themselves for battle.

Q: How many poems did you have to learn, that you failed? I hate to mention --

A: Well, thi -- this is the one I failed.

Q: I see.

A: And a -- but I don't remember how many others you had to memorize.

Q: You mean only one poem and you failed?

A: One full poem, I must have failed in my written test as well, I -- I really don't know.

Q: Yeah.

A: I don't remember that any more. Whatever it is, it was a lucky --

Q: Oh yes.

A: -- event in my life that I failed --

Q: Right.

A: -- Lithuanian.

Q: I understand you -- you must have had a number of friends because you played soccer and you were playing around.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have one special friend?

A: Well, as a matter of fact, one of my close friends, we went to school together in Lithuania, came to the United States in 1939. And we have remained good friends since, always, and he lives in Boston, and he has a place in Palm Beach, so during the winter we always have an opportunity to get together and reminisce about the past.

Q: Right. And what's his name?

A: His name is Sam Sheldon, S-h-e-l-d-o-n.

Q: But that wasn't his name then.

A: No, it was Shmukla.

Q: Shmukla.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you experience any anti-Semitism when you were living in Lithuania?

A: Oh yes. There were always fights between some of the Lithuanian boys and the Jewish boys. However, since we associated mostly with our own, we have not experienced that much anti-Semitism, so to say.

Q: Mm-hm. When -- when you are 13, Hitler takes over in Germany.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Do you discuss this, do you hear people talking about what it means?

A: Oh yes, we discussed it, we ma -- heard -- we listened to the radio, we listened to his pronouncements. And we were concerned about it, but not really concerned enough so that you would want to run away. Nobody really imagined that the Holocaust would take place.

Q: Right.

A: And besides, my father was very -- he had a successful -- in business, and was dealing with the Lithuanian government and he thought, probably at the time that nothing terrible is going to happen to him because they need him. The -- the country wouldn't function without him.

Q: Right, right.

A: Well, I don't have to tell you that after the war broke out, the Russians came in to Lithuania. They confiscated my bu -- my father's business, his accounts, his warehouses, and in addition they told him that he owes them taxes for prior years. And I recall receiving a letter from my parents that they need some money to pay for taxes, otherwise I presume they would go to jail or whatever. And so they requested that I pay, I think it's -- probably was like 2000 dollars to an individual in the United States, and he would arrange with his connections [indecipherable] family whatever, to pay them in rubles or whatever, so that it would settle with the government.

Q: And you had this money? Or was this from your uncle?

A: I borrowed the money from my uncle.

Q: From your uncle. Let -- let me go back a little bit. You leave Lithuania in 1936.

A: Right.

Q: And how do you leave? Where -- where do you leave from?

A: I leave from Poinyavich. From Poinyavich we went to Kovno by train. And in Kovno we left by a direct express train tha -- to Paris.

Q: To Paris. Now when you say we, who is we?

A: Good question. There was a distant relative, my aunt's husband's brother, who was visiting his parents, and he was going back to America, and so they -- my parents arranged that we would travel together.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: So we went, the two of us, to Paris, and the reason we went to Paris is because my mother's sister lived in Paris. And so we stayed in Paris for about a week, or thereabouts.

Q: Was that the first time you were in Paris?

A: Yes. The first time I was in Paris, that was in 1936, and then we went to Le Havre where we took a ship called the Paris, to the United States. And it may sound unreal, but I traveled first class.

Q: Really?

A: Yes. And now you wonder, how did I travel first class?

Q: Okay, how did you?

A: Well, there was a depression, right?

Q: Yes.

A: And so there weren't too many people that could afford to go first class. So the first class cabins were sort of empty, and the ship decided to put a number of us in a first class cabin, maybe like six or eight of us. And so I came to the United States --

Q: First class.

A: -- first class.

Q: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

A: I beg your pardon?

Q: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

A: The Statue of Liberty, yes, I remember s-seeing the Statue of Liberty because we landed in New York.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: So we bypassed the Statue of Liberty and we landed, I guess it was either in the 40's or the 50's on the West Side. And there was my two uncles in the pier, meeting me.

Q: Wait a minute, two uncles?

A: Two.

Q: You had -- two brothers of your --

A: I had -- two brothers.

Q: -- of your mother?

A: Yes.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: The uncle that brought me over --

Q: Right.

A: -- and his younger brother.

Q: Right.

A: And so I came and I stayed for the first week or two with my uncle, and --

Q: And his name?

A: His name was Aleck Leitman, A-l-e-c-k, and his last name was Leitman, L-e-i-t-m-a-n. And he was rather successful. He had a wholesale army and navy store and he was buying surplus

equipment from the government and refurbishing it and selling it in his store in New York. And so I stayed with my uncle, who had a very nice apartment on 82nd Street and Riverside Drive.

Q: Mm.

A: And my -- he had a -- he had a very American wife, who made sure that you mind your manners at the dining room table. And --

Q: Were you not used to that?

A: Well, not the way she expected to.

Q: Was she -- she was tough?

A: She was tough.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I mean, you'd pick up the fork the right way, you transferred the -- the knife the right way, it -- you know, by the time you got finished you didn't enjoy the dinner so much.

Q: So you had to eat the way an American would, not the way the Europeans would, you --

A: Right, exactly.

Q: -- so you had to switch --

A: Exactly, switch the hi -- yes.

Q: -- the knife and the fork, yes? Tell me something, was it very difficult for you to leave? Even though you said it was not going to necessarily be forever, how difficult was that for you?

A: It -- all I can tell you is, when I got on the train in Kovno, I cried all my way --

Q: Mm.

A: -- to Paris, practically. I remember how scared I was when we crossed the German border and we had to get off the train and they showed them our passports, and our money and whatever, and how they screamed at us, and how they treated us, and I couldn't wait to get back on the

train. We then stopped -- the train stopped in Berlin I remember, and we had breakfast at the railroad station in Berlin. And again, I couldn't wait to get back on the train and to continue our journey to Paris.

Q: And what do you think you were afraid of then?

A: Well, because we were ce-certainly aware of the Gestapo in those days. We were aware of the -- the German solution. Nobody believed it, but we knew what it proclaimed.

Q: Do you think your unc -- did you talk about this with your uncle? Was he as afraid as y -- as you were, do you think?

A: Well, my uncle was in America.

Q: Right.

A: I was in Lithuania.

Q: Right.

A: So I really had no occasion to talk to my uncle about it.

Q: You didn't have a common language between the two of you?

A: Well, my uncle and I spoke Yiddish.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: So we could converse. As a matter of fact, I was very close to my uncle and my uncle was very, very good to me. And because my uncle was spending so much time with me that his wife resented it. And one day she told me that her sister from Baltimore is coming and that she needs the room, and that I will have to find another place to live.

Q: You were 16 - 17?

A: 16 years old. And so I had to find another place to live, so the first thing we did is I went to the 92nd Street Y. And they didn't have any rooms available at the time, so they suggested that

there is a family that's looking for a border, and they have a room, and we went to see them, and we arranged to -- that I would stay with them in their -- in that room, and three meals a day, and my uncle was paying 40 dollars a month for that room and board. And in addition he gave me an allowance of three and a half dollars a week, which I had to use for subway fare, lunches, personal things and whatever. But you know what? We managed.

Q: You did. But that must have been very tough on you because you hadn't been here that long.

A: It was very tough, as a matter of fact, I -- I would -- when I went into the subway I was overwhelmed because of all the trains, express, local, uptown, downtown, and I would go from my ru -- from my place where I lived, to school. I was enrolled in a high school in New York, at the Seward Park High School, which was on the east side. And the reason I was enrolled in that school is because my uncle's bookkeeper had a sister that was teaching in that school, so my uncle said to his bookkeeper, you got to enroll him in school so she enrolled me in the school where her sister was teaching. So that was Seward Park High School.

Q: But did you speak English?

A: Did I speak English? No, I did not spe -- I -- I ne -- knew a few words --

Q: Mm.

A: But I didn't speak English. So it was very difficult and very scary, but you go through it.

Q: Were you lonely?

A: I was very lonely. As a matter of fact, I must tell you, there was a time that I was considering going back to Lithuania. But I didn't go back because I would have been admitting that I'm a failure again. Here I am in the United States where the streets are lined with gold, and I am the felda that had to come back to Lithuania. So, is -- no matter how difficult it was, you -- you have to continue.

Q: So when did you graduate?

A: I graduated at the age of 18. When I went to school they gave me credit for a number of the courses which I took in Lithuania, and which I didn't have to repeat here, like math and sciences, which I excelled in.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And so I had to concentrate primarily on English and American history and so forth. So the first term, for instance, I would take English one and two, the second term I took English three and four. The second year I took English five and six, and the final year -- final term, I took English seven, I skipped eight.

Q: Really?

A: Yes. And I got an 85, I think on the --

Q: On the regents?

A: On the regents.

Q: No Lithuanian, right? No Latin.

A: No Lithuanian, I didn't have to study Lithuanian.

Q: Right. Did they draft you when you turned 18?

A: I beg your pardon?

Q: Did the American government draft you?

A: Yes, I went into service in 1942.

Q: 1942. So what did you do between '38 --

A: Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait -- not 1942, it was actually 1944.

Q: Okay, so for a good part of the war --

A: Mm-hm.

Q: -- your parents and your brother and all your relatives, or most of them were in Lithuania.

A: Right.

Q: You're writing to each other.

A: Soon as the war broke out --

Q: They -- there's not --

A: -- the mail stopped.

Q: So this i -- are you talking about 1941, or you talking about -- between 1939 and --

A: I'm -- be -- be -- between '41 --

Q: Right, and '44, there's nothing.

A: -- and '44, no communication.

Q: Right. But between 1939 and 1941, you are able to write, when they're under the Russians?

A: I think so. I think so.

Q: So this must have been very scary for you. I mean, you don't even have contact now.

A: That is true, but neither did anybody else.

Q: Yeah, but that doesn't necessarily help you.

A: No, it doesn't help you.

Q: Right.

A: But you had to face the times.

Q: Right. Now are you seeing your uncle? Does your aunt relent a little bit so you get to see --

A: Oh, I ca -- I was in business with my uncle.

Q: Oh, so explain.

A: Yes, I -- as a matter of fact, I continued to work for my uncle, and -- in his business, and as a matter of fact, I think in 1940 he made me a partner in that -- in the business.

Q: Really?

A: Yes. He gave me a 25 percent interest in the business, and --

Q: And you're 20 years old?

A: 20 years old. At that time I lived already at the 92nd Street Y, because by that time I was able to get a room at the 92nd -- second Street Y. And I was relatively happy because I had an opportunity to associate with a lot of young men my age, and we were exposed at the Y to the arts.

Q: Right.

A: We had -- were able to attend concerts, performances by famous violinists and pianists and whatever. And it was a fairly nice life. As a matter of fact, in 1941, I bought my first car.

Q: Really?

A: Yes.

Q: What'd you buy?

A: I bought a Chrysler fluid drive., a bu -- brand new Chrysler fluid drive. Why did I buy a Chrysler fluid drive? Because I never drove a car with a shift. And the -- and the Chrysler fluid drive didn't require shifting, you just put it in gear once and that's it.

Q: Had you driven before? Anything?

A: Actually, when I bought the car, I didn't have a driver's license. Never -- but I had somebody who was working for my uncle drive with me and I took some driving lessons and I -- I must admit another failure. I failed the driving test the first time.

Q: Really?

A: I had to take it a second time, which I passed. It was really funny, you get -- you have a car and you don't have a driver's license.

Q: Yeah.

A: And --

Q: Where did you keep the car?

A: In a garage next to the 92nd Street Y. As a matter of fact, you know Mr. Haberman who writes a column in the New York Times?

Q: Mm-hm.

A: He interviewed me at the time, and he said, well how much rent did you pay at the Y? I said five dollars a week. And where did you garage the car? I said down the street. And how much did you pay for the garage? And I said 25 dollars a month. He says, you paid five dollars a week for a room, 25 dollars a month for garaging your car? But, as a matter of fact, I then moved to a residential hotel on the west side, I think it was on 84th Street, between Amsterdam -- no, near the Riverside Drive. And that was -- I had beautiful accommodations, yeah. It was a studio with a kitchenette which was closed in with doors. Beautiful furniture. Had a restaurant in the buil -- in the building, and had an indoor swimming pool.

Q: Really?

A: So by that time I was already rich.

Q: Yeah. What were you doing as a partner? What was your role?

A: Well, at that time we were engaged in manufacturing for the government.

Q: For the what?

A: For the United States government.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And it was my job to, when we got requests from the government to bid on certain items, to break down the drawings and specifications and prepare a bill of materials, estimate the labor

and then submit a bid to the government. So that was primarily my job, and because I was pretty good in math and sciences, and [indecipherable] material and so forth, I was able to calculate and to price it out. And we were at a -- very successful in that business.

Q: And what were you actually doing for the government once you --

A: Well, we were making various items for the government. One of the first contracts -- I remember getting a big contract, was for helmet lines. It was an aluminum frame covered with calfskin leather which would fit into the helmet. I remember making sleeping bags. That's a funny story, Phyllis always tells me about it -- reminds me about it. I --

Q: Well, you know something, let's -- let's go to the next tape, cause I have the feeling it's going to go on for a bit longer, so let's stop this tape.

End of Tape Two

Beginning Tape Three

Q: Okay. We'll -- we'll talk --

A: Well, one of the f-first contracts that we got was to manufacture sleeping bags for the air force. Now that sleeping bag was filled with down. I didn't even know what the word down was. And so I had to prepare a bid and calculate the cost of the materials, and I start calling around to find out about the price of down, and where do you get that? Well, basically you had the Yellow Pages, and you open up the Yellow Page, and you look f -- f -- under down for manufacturers on down, and we had to utilize a hundred percent down. When I called the suppliers and I ask them for hundred percent down, they said there is no such thing as hundred percent down. Hundred percent down contains probably 10 percent little feathers. Well, I said my specification calls for a hundred percent down, I can't use little feathers. Well, they said, you're not going to find anybody that makes hundred percent down, per se. And so anyhow, I was able to get a price on -- be so-called hundred percent down and we submitted a bid to the government and we got the contract. And it was one of the first contracts where I got myself familiarized with the term down. But there were many other contracts which we received at the time. We made bandoliers, where the soldiers kept their shells or whatever.

Q: Is that like a belt?

A: Yes. We made firemen's clothing from an aluminized asbestos cloth which would enable the firemen to go in and rescue say, a pilot under 2,000 degree temperature. We made the helmet, we made the gloves, we made the -- a jacket and trousers. We made parachute drop equipment. We made targets, tow targets. So the tow targets were made, some were wound tow targets which were made from cloth, and other tow targets were made from sort of a mesh material.

Q: What's a tow target, what is that?

A: Tow targets, well, in order for the pilots to practice --

Q: Uh-huh.

A: -- gunnery in a plane, they need a target --

Q: Right.

A: -- to fire. So there is one plane that has attached to it, a target --

Q: I see.

A: -- which they towed behind the plane.

Q: Oh, a tow tar -- I see.

A: A tow target.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: And so that the other pilots or whatever, fighters, would aim their bullets into that particular target.

Q: Right.

A: And that when they fired the bullet in that target, it would leave a mark --

Q: Right.

A: -- in the tow target, so they would know which pilot, or whatever, registered on the target --

Q: Right, right.

A: -- and so forth. So we made tow targets. We made many things which the government needed at the time.

Q: So were you a kind of middle person and contracted out, or did he have a factory that did all --

A: We had a factory that made it all.

Q: Really?

A: We made it ourself.

Q: Wow.

A: We were our own contractors. So we started with the raw material, and we sold the finished item, and we had, you know, government inspectors at -- on the premises --

Q: Right.

A: -- at all times to make sure that we meet the government specifications.

Q: Right.

A: And that was another challenge because when you deal with the government, there is no right way, there is no wrong way, it's only the army way. And when they tell you you -- you s -- sew it with 10 stitches per inch, it better be 10 stitches per inch. Nine will not do, 11 will not do, it better be 10. And so that you had to follow explicitly the government specifications.

Q: Right.

A: And that was a challenge.

Q: I bet. Now let me ask you something, cause it strikes me that you -- I don't know if you feel somewhat schizophrenic in the United States when you're 20 and 21, but when the war happens, and your family is over there, and you're here relatively safe, that must be really hard for you. You're reading newspapers, you're hearing the news on the radio.

A: Well, you know, you hear the news and you never heard really of the atrocities which were committed.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: At least that is my recollection.

Q: So during --

A: We knew there was a problems, we knew it was difficult, but we never imagined that there were concentration camps, we never imagined that there were gas chambers and whatever.

Q: Right.

A: And we -- I didn't know, for instance, that my mother was killed practically the day that the Germans marched into Lithuania.

Q: With the Einsatzgrup, I guess, you -- you think she was shot?

A: Oh, not only do I think, I know.

Q: You know she was shot.

A: What happened is that -- and it -- actually I'm -- I'm ashamed to say it, it was the Lithuanians that gathered the entire population of this Jews of the city Poinyavich, marched them to the suburbs, made them dig trenches and machine gunned the entire 7,000, men, women, children, the whole thing. And what is so i-interesting is that the Germans kept meticulous records of the destruction of the Jewish people, and that episode of the killing of the Jews in Lithuania, appears among the papers --

Q: Of the Germans.

A: -- of the Germans.

Q: And where is your father, and now your brother?

A: My brother -- my mother the -- realized the situation in Poinyavich was rather hazardous, so she sent my brother to Kovno to tell my father not to come back. So my brother went to Kovno to tell my father what the situation is, and that my mother said don't come back. And what happened is that my brother, and my father, who were in Kovno, were placed in the Kovno ghetto. And they stayed in the Kovno ghetto I think about a year and a half or two years. They

were then transferred to Dachau, and it was in Dachau that my father died, really from starvation, because whatever meager rations he received, he gave to my brother --

Q: Right.

A: -- so that he should survive.

Q: And when do you find all this out, if during the war you don't know anything? Is it long after the war, right after the war?

A: Well, right after the war I remember seeing a list of survivors which was published by the American Red Cross, and my father's name appeared there as being killed in Dachau, and it also appeared that my brother survived. And then I heard from other people, relatives and whatnot, that my brother survived, and he is in Europe. It seems that my brother tried to get in touch with me, but he didn't have the right address because since that -- since he had the address when I left home, we moved and so forth. And I never received any mail from him. And he was in -- I guess in a camp, and --

Q: You mean when he was in the DP camp afterwards, yes.

A: In -- yes, right. S-So my brother wasn't exactly sure what happened to my mother. So he went back to Poinyavich to look for my mother. And, you know, at that time the former Soviet Union was in charge of Lithuania, the Iron Curtain came down, so you were able to get into Lithuania, but you couldn't get out.

Q: So he's stuck.

A: Stuck. By the time I was able to establish contact with my brother, he was married, he had a child, a wife, in-laws, and it was not feasible to smuggle him out from Lithuania.

Q: I see.

A: So that --

Q: So what year is this when you -- when you s --

A: That was -- well, the end of the war was 1945, and he got married at the end of ’45. I think the child was born in ’46, so -- and I was not able to communicate with my brother directly, so it seems that all the letters which I sent to him, and the return address which he sent to me, went through a third party. He was afraid that if the Russians find out that he has a brother in the United States, a capitalist, whatever, that he will lose his job because at one point he had a very good job in Poinyavich right after the war, but then somebody said, you know, his father was a capitalist and he has a brother capitalist and so he got fired, because his brother is a capitalist and his father was a capitalist. So he was afraid to disclose that he has a brother in the United States. However, in subsequent years, I sent him packages. Again, not directly to him, but through a third party, and he would be able to barter the packages for either food, or for whatever else, or sell it, and that has enabled him to live a better life than otherwise. So with the help of the packages which I sent him regularly for many years, he subsequently is a very capable man, spoke Lithuanian fluently, spoke Russian fluently, spoke Yiddish fluently, all these things which I couldn’t do, he was able to do very well. And so he got a -- a very significant job with the Russian government and he was in charge of food distribution for the -- for Wilna and it’s surrounding. Well, that was a very big job because with food you cou -- in those days, you could trade and help people in many ways. The story goes, supposedly, I don’t know whether it’s true or not, but when the president of Lithuania, the prime minister had a birthday party and he needed vodka or food or whatever, he had to get permission from my brother to get these supplies. So he had a fairly good job, and then he was in charge also of their hotels which -- which were built to cater to foreign dignitaries. So that he had occasion to go to all the Russian -- to Czechoslovakia, to some of the other Russian countries, whatever, and learn how to run a -- an

outs -- what I would call a hotel that caters to dignitaries. And he had a fairly good life. The first time I actually met -- saw my brother since I left home in 1936 was in 1988. That's 52 years later. And I met my brother in Israel. It seems that a Maccabee team from Lithuania came to Israel to participate in the games and my brother was very much involved with the soccer team in Lithuania, and so he came, he got permission to travel with the team to Israel for the soccer games. And that is the first time that I met -- I saw my brother after 52 years.

Q: What was that like?

A: It was very difficult to say the leas -- the least, but you know, he -- he is a very outgoing person, very -- very able, and he -- if I say so myself, he adored me, because I am his source of survival. And I finally convinced him in 1988 to move to Israel, because he had such a good job in Lithuania. He had a car, he had a dacha, he had computers, he had everything. And here he has to give it all up and move to Israel where his children don't speak the language, where -- well, he spoke some Hebrew because he went to a Hebrew high school, but it's starting a whole new life.

Q: Right.

A: So I had to promise him that I will get him a condominium for him, a condominium for his daughter, for his son. I will get them cars, and I will make sure that they will be able to live in relative comfort in Israel. And it was only after these promises that he has agreed to move to Israel. So in 1989, I think, he moved to Israel.

Q: Did you want him to move to the United States?

A: Really, I don't think he would have been as happy in the United States as he was in Israel. First of all, there was a big migration of Soviet Jews to Israel. So a lot of his friends came --

Q: Right.

A: -- to Israel. It would have been a -- much more difficult for him and for his family to acclimate to a life in the United States.

Q: And they were allowed to leave in ’89?

A: I beg your pardon?

Q: They were allowed to leave Lithuania?

A: To leave Lithuania, yes.

Q: That was okay?

A: Yes.

Q: Well, what is this like? You left, you were 16, he was 10, and when you see him, he’s in his 60’s, yes?

A: Well --

Q: And it -- it’s a --

A: -- y-you’re right.

Q: It’s a huge --

A: It -- it -- it’s a huge -- you know, I sometimes wonder, really what do we have in common?

Q: Right.

A: And what we have in common is basically our parents and our Jewish tradition, and my responsibility since my father was killed, that I had to take over and provide for the family. But we didn’t have this close relationship that normally brothers have.

Q: Right.

A: We lived in different worlds. I lived in the United States, and he lived in Russia. We were both very comfortable, he in Russia and I in the United States.

Q: Right. But he also was in the ghetto, which had to have been a very difficult experience with -- with your father. Did he talk about that with you at all?

A: Well, actually he never really wanted to discuss his life in the ghetto, or his life in Dachau. He did tell me about Dachau that when the Americans were nearing Dachau that the Germans decided to vacate the camp, and they decided to march them east. And he tells me the story that while they were marching in the -- through the woods, and his feet, he -- were bleeding, he was exhausted, and he tells me that he couldn't take it any more and he and a friend of his decided to fall to the ground, and whatever it is, it is. And he tells me the story about this German soldier that came across him and said to his friend, don't waste a bullet on him, he is dead. And so they passed by and he then wi -- with his friend, ran to find food or shelter, or whatever. And they came across a farm and when they knocked on the door, the Germans were frightened obviously and they said wa -- all we want is some food and -- and some water, whatever. And the Germans said, we don't have any food, but the American army is across on that river, and if you cross that bridge, y-you'll find the American army and they will be able to help you. And you better hurry up because the bridge is going to be blown up. So with whatever strength he and his friend had, they ran across the river and no sooner did they get to the other side of the river, the bridge blew up. But by that time they were on the side where the Americans were, and so they received food, shelter and so forth from the American army.

Q: But that's all he was [indecipherable]

A: That's all he -- but he wouldn't have -- he wouldn't tell me about the -- his experiences in Dachau, about the killings in Dachau. You know, he didn't a -- and he didn't discuss -- he doesn't discuss much about his life in the ghetto, either. Although, I understand from some cousins of mine that when he was in the ghetto, my father arranged for him to get married in the

ghetto. And he must have been then -- what wa -- 16 - 17, and that his wife was taken away, and -- from the ghetto or whatever, and he never saw her again.

Q: And -- but he didn't tell you this. It was other people.

A: He didn't -- he didn't tell me that, because I don't think his current wife knows about it, that he was married.

Q: I see. And is -- was his current wife a Lithuanian Gentile, or was she Jewish?

A: No, she a Jewish girl.

Q: She's a Jewish girl.

A: It's when he went back to Lithuania, to Poinyavich to look for my mother, he came across that Jewish family, they took him in. They had a daughter, they got married and before you knew there was a baby. And the other -- the only other thing he tells me is that he was able to reclaim my father's home. And he then sold the house, which belonged to my father, and no sooner did he sell the house that that money became devalued. That he told me.

Q: Right. Tell me something. What -- if you can answer this question, what sort of effect does this history have on you, the fact that your mother was murdered and your father got killed.

A: Well, it had -- it -- obviously it's a very central part of my life. This is why I am so committed to Israel. This is why I am committed to the importance of the state of Israel, because it's my view that if we had an Israel at the time, we had a place that would have admitted Jews, maybe my parents could have been saved, and my parents wou -- with not only my parents, with my grandparents, my uncles, my cousins, everybody else that was killed by the Lithuanians in 1941. So I have done a number of things to memorialize it. One of the things which I always hoped, that I would be able to bring my parents over, and to give them the type -- the kind of lifestyle that they gave me when I was a kid. And obviously that was not to be. So I got involved in

building a geriatric center. And I felt, while I may not be able to take care of my parents, I will be able to take care of other parents, who will be able to finish their years in a home where they could -- are surrounded by their own people, and they would spend the rest of their life in dignity, and -- so we build this communities -- this geriatric center, which is called the Gurwin Jewish geriatric center. It's in Commack, Long Island, and it is an -- if I say so myself, an outstanding geriatric center. It has 460 beds, it has another 120 daycare patients, and it has apartments with assisted living for 200 units. And so I have devoted a lot of time, effort and energy to build this geriatric center, and to maintain it in a style which would be a credit to the Jewish community.

Q: We're gonna -- I'm going to have to break now for the tape.

End of Tape Three

Beginning Tape Four

Q: Okay. You were continuing to talk about the -- the ways in which you have been affected by the Holocaust and what you've done because of it.

A: Well, because of that, I have been a leader in the UJA Federation of New York. I was chairman of the board for three, four years, and -- think it was between 1987 and 1990. I am very supportive of all Jewish causes. I have sent up two satellites called Gurwin one and two. They were built in Israel, they were designed by Technion, built by Israel aircraft industry and they were launched on a Russian missile from Kazakhstan.

Q: Really?

A: Yes. The first satellite went kaput.

Q: You mean it just blew up?

A: Because --

Q: Oke --

A: -- the Russian missile did not ignite the fourth stage, so it never got into orbit.

Q: I see.

A: And -- and so I said it was not the fault of Technion, it was the fault of the Russian missile, so we're going to build a second one. So we have a second satellite, that's why it's called Gurwin two, and it is still circling --

Q: Really?

A: -- the world to this day. It was originally designed that it would last probably a year or two at the most. It's now six or seven years and it's still in orbit.

Q: Wow.

A: So that was one of the things which I did. I am on the board of Technion and I'm also on the board of the Weizmann Institute of Science. And I am very supportive of both institutions. I have received a doctorate from Technion and I'm getting a PhD. from the Weizmann Institute in November.

Q: That's great.

A: So -- and I have been involved in every -- whether I was a guest of honor of ADL in Palm Beach, I was guest of honor of the American Jewish Committee in Palm Beach. I have been involved with the Magen [indecipherable] where we contributed, Phyllis and I, to ambulances which bear our name. I'm very much involved with the Long Island Jewish hospital which I am on board, and we have built there an educational resource center. So, we have done whatever we could in our own way to -- to make this a better world to live in.

Q: Right. Did you ever want to read very much about the Holocaust, or s --

A: Do what?

Q: Read about it, or see the movies, or da -- is it too hard for you to do that?

A: It is too hard for me --

Q: Mm-hm.

A: -- to do it. I remember going to see Schimberg's List.

Q: "Schindler's List", yes.

A: Was very difficult.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: And I remember seeing -- there's, I think an Italian movie about this couple that lived in Italy, in luxury and so forth, and it brought back memories --

Q: Right.

A: -- that were very difficult.

Q: Did you -- were you at exhibitions at the Holocaust museum in Washington, and in Yad Vashem, and here in New York, or you don't even do that?

A: No, I been in -- in the Holocaust museum several times.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I have been at Yad Vashem several times. As a matter of fact, I have been at the -- the latest Yad Vashem only last year.

Q: The new --

A: It was [indecipherable]

Q: -- the new exhibition there, yes. The new exhibition at Yad Vashem.

A: Yes.

Q: So you can go through the exhibitions?

A: I can go -- go through the exhibition. I remember they had the children's memorial in Yad Vashem.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: I remember going through with -- with it with my late wife, she couldn't do it.

Q: Mm. And was she in Europe at the time, or she wasn't?

A: No --

Q: No.

A: -- she's an American, lived in the United States.

Q: Uh-huh, but she couldn't -- no.

A: No.

Q: So is it a kind of --

A: [inaudible]

Q: -- back-drop for you, as if it's a screen in back, so that it's always a part of who you are, you think?

A: Oh yes. I will never forget it, it is part of my life, and as long as I'm alive, I will wa -- remember it, and do whatever I can to make sure that this does not happen again.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And so it just so happens that this is August the first and this terrible battle that's taking place in Israel today, and I am very, very upset about it. I -- I am just very concerned for the future of Israel, and for the future of the Jewish people.

Q: Mm-hm. Is there anything else you'd like to say? Anything I haven't asked you that you would like to talk about?

A: Well, I don't know. I think we covered most of it. I just hope that my children will continue to support the philanthropic activities in which I am involved with. I am going to leave them a foundation which will enable them to do whatever they would like to do, but hopefully they will support the causes which I have supported.

Q: And you have two sons?

A: I have a son and I have a daughter.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: I have a son who is an ophthalmologist.

Q: Mm-hm.

A: And he has his wife and he has three children.

Q: These are -- these are the people who are going to Kilimanjaro?

A: They are c-climbing Kilimanjaro.

Q: Yes, yes.

A: And then there i -- I have a daughter, and she has one daughter -- I have one granddaughter, and she's just graduated a year ago from MIT. And my daughter is now retired, she was working for 25 years at Mount Sinai hospital in New York. She has a degree in hospital administration. And she hopefully will have the time to devote to my causes, and we'll see.

Q: Right. Well, I want to thank you very much for taking the time. I know this is not an easy tale for you to talk about so I thank you very much.

A: Well, it's always difficult, but realizing what we are up against, and the denials that they place every day about the Holocaust, it is my opportunity to stand witness for what happened to my parents and the rest of my family.

Q: We're very grateful to you, thank you.

End of Tape Four

Conclusion of Interview