

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Esia Shor
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a recorded interview with Esia Shor, conducted by Judith Cohen on February 22, 2010 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Bronx, NY 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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ESIA SHOR
February 22, 2010

Question: This is an interview with **Esia Shor** at her home in **Bronx, New York**, on February two –

Answer: Twenty-sec –

Q: – 22nd, 2010. Mrs. **Shor**, I'm wondering if we can start by telling me your name at birth, and the names of your parents and siblings, and approximate dates of birth of the family.

A: Mm, that's painful. My name is **Eske Shor. Eske Eserkin(ph)**, this was **Eske Levine**, my maiden name. **[indecipherable]** a mistake. All right, **Eske Levine**, yeah. **[indecipherable]** we went – I – I lived in **Novogradok**. I was born in 1925, December the third. And –

Q: And your parents' names?

A: My parents' names, my father was **Smolnoma(ph) Samuel**, they called him in – was a religious person. He was a bookbinder in **Novogradok**. My grandfather was a bookbinder. And my mother's name was **Shill – Tsil(ph) Amanda Levitch(ph)**. And she was born in – not far from **Stankievicz**, in a village. In **Stankievicz**, my family, meaning the **Bielski** brothers, who were my first cousins, they were born also in **Stankievicz**.

Q: So, how were you related to the **Bielskis**, your –

A: My mother and their mother were sisters.

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Q: Ah, okay.

A: And they used to come to our house very often. It was about 14 miles from our house. They still lived in that village, **Stankievicz**.

Q: How did you get from one house to the other, were you – walk, or –

A: Well, they – they would come by horse and wagon, or later on some of them were using a bicycle, but it was still 14 miles to go by bicycle, you know, when the children were younger, that's how they used to come to my house. In vacation time, I went there.

Q: Did you spend holidays together? **Pesach**, or –

A: Not really, because we were more on the religious side, and they grew up in the village. And you know, matzos were very expensive in those days. So, like, if they had their mother did the ma – the matzos were bought in **Novogradok**, in my hometown, that's where we baked the matzos. We didn't get from the **United States** any matzos. Later on, yes, in **Germany**, but not in **Poland**.

Q: So?

A: So, you know, they were not as religious as we were, meaning my father and mother.

Q: Before we talk a little more about life before, can you just give me the names of your siblings **[indecipherable]**

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A: My two brothers, **Israel**, who was 18 years old, and my younger brother, who was 14, **Aron**.

Q: This is when the war broke out, that they're 18 –

A: Yes, 18 and 14, they tried to run away to the **Bielskis**.

Q: Right.

A: And they were, unfortunately, pointed out by Christians that they are Jews.

Because they were waiting for us, we made up that we'll meet them there, at the si – at some relatives house. And in those days, the family was very closely knitted. I mean, how we gonna run – they knew how to go there –

Q: Right.

A: – without mother and father and sisters and brothers. So that's –

Q: Yeah.

A: – how it took place, and they got killed. After the war, of course, my father and I buried them. They even threw our dog on them, you know?

Q: We'll come back to that, we would – a little before the war, a-and you had two sisters?

A: I had two si-sisters. One was 10, going on 11, but 10, and the other one was six years old.

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Q: Mm-hm. And let's just hop – before we go into the war, a little bit more about life before. So it was a religious family, you went to a **Beis Yaakov**?

A: Yes, **Beis Yaakov** was, we had like an organization **Beis Yaakov**. It wasn't like here, a **Beis Yaakov** school, because it was expensive. My – my brothers went to learn how to **daven**, so the preference was to pay for the brothers, because you had to pay for it, to go to **chayder**. And I went to learn how to **daven** in **Beis Yaakov**, meaning **bassia**(ph) was the organization. And I went – that's where I met **Itka** and also the **Kushnars**(ph) mother.

Q: And you went to a public elementary school?

A: Yes, I went to Po-Polish. Polish –

Q: With – and did you have any Polisher friends, or did the Jews stay on one side, and the Poles stay –

A: Well, not really, because I – there were – in my class there were two Jewish girls. The people who had money send the-then to a **chayder** or a Hebrew school, there was a **Tarbud**. We couldn't afford. My mother and father only send the boys to a **chayder**, and I went to public school. And then we were a little bit more comfortable financially, my sister **Rivale**, who was 10 years old, she went to a Hebrew school, too.

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Q: And your father, as a bookbinder, was he binding secular books also, or just religious books?

A: Yeah, all the ones, all –

Q: So he had Polish clientele?

A: Oh, my mother used to bring, because she was born in a – you know, in a village, and knew Polish to s – how to speak without an accent and so on. So she would go to the offices and get the books for my father to be bound, and I knew how to bind the book, because we had to help my father. Everything was done by hand, the sewing and everything of the books.

Q: I want to jump to after September 1939, the start of World War II.

A: Yes.

Q: You, your village, **Novogradok** was on the Soviet side. I want to ask you two questions, one is –

A: Wasn't a village.

Q: Ah, town.

A: No, it was a town that was like a – like here we have, you know, n-n-not as large as **New York**, of course, we have the states. This was like a state in their way of thinking, like **New York** state. So I lived in **Novogradok**. The town itself wasn't

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big, what – we had, about 5,000 Jews living there. And that's why they had the **Beis Yaakov** and all the Hebrew schools and so on.

Q: So I was wondering, in these years, '39 to '41, I wanted to ask you two questions. One is, were you aware of what was going on in the part of **Poland**, western **Poland** that was under German occupation? Did any information come through? And the other question is, did your life change at all under the **Soviet Union**?

A: I personally think my life improved, because when **Stalin** was, when we – at that time **Stalin** was the leader of **Russia**, there was no anti-Semitism. As a matter of fact, we liked it better to be under Russians than the Poles, because the Poles were anti-Semitic. I never went back to **Poland**, even though my fath – my – my husband – show you the picture – was a – a lieutenant in the army during the war, and was injured. And the pension was coming to him, but I wasn't going to go there with him and he didn't go by my – by himself. So that's how I felt. And I'll get to it why I felt this way. One wanted to help me and the other one said, here is a Jewish girl in the navy blue jacket. So, I threw off the jacket and I ran into a ditch, and I yo – survived. These few days there were very crucial.

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Q: Right. And when you were under the Soviet occupation, were you aware of what was going on in western **Poland**, or was that too far away? Was there any information leaking through?

A: We – we somehow got an idea that the Germans are very bad to the Jews. But we didn't think that they can take **Russia**, that part, back, you know? I personally was overjoyed, to be honest with you. I went to their school for one year, I learned Russian, and I got that coat that the other girls were trying on, everybody liked it. It was wartime, so the idea was oh, she looks so heroic, you know, in that coat, that you saw on my book. And I was a good student, and then we decided, my father and I, to leave **Poland** –

Q: Do you – can you just –

A: – after a year, close to a year. A year.

Q: Yeah. Can you describe day – June, 1941?

A: Yeah.

Q: What happened the day the Germans invaded the **Soviet Union** and eastern **Poland**? Where were you when you found out that the Germans had crossed the border?

A: I was in my house, I didn't run any place. And that was a tragic time, because we already got the idea what they are doing. So, they hoarded us – they – they gave us

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about five, six months to live still in the house. I mean, there was nothing that they killed, and sort of did anything.

Q: Did the German troops arrive in **Novogradok** immediately, or were you ignored in the first month?

A: Well, they arrived immediately, I would say, because I worked for the courthouse there, not as a – as a secretary, but I was – we had to go and to get potatoes for them, see that they – they weren't throw out the ones that weren't good, the ones that were good, you know. And they let us there stay about six, seven months I would say, til December. **[doorbell]** Not expecting anyone.

Q: Do you want me to pause this?

A: Yes. **[tape break]**

Q: We were talking a minute ago about the first days of the war when the Germans invaded in June '41, and in your book you talk about how your family fled to the **Bielski** farm, and about how **Tuvia** and his brothers were already standing guard, which I thought was an amazing –

A: Yes.

Q: – scenario, because it gave a sense of what was gonna come. Can you describe that?

A: Well, what happened was, this wasn't yet that they didn't kill Jews at that time,

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they came and they invaded the part that I lived. And what happened was, their mother, and my mother, of course, they grew up amongst the Christian people. This was a village where they lived. And this was only two families, not far from one another, but lived two jeesh – Jewish families. So when we came there, just to run away from the bombs – as a matter of fact, our house was destroyed at that time by bombing, you know. They bombed **Novogradok**. So we just went with the horse and wagon. My mother was born in the village, she knew how to sort of direct the horse and so on. So, when we came there, and we stayed in the barn, because they had a very small house, very small. There were 11 children – not at one time, but – and the house was very small, so we stayed in the barn. We lived – we slept in the barn. So when we went to sleep in the barn, my Aunt **Bella**, meaning my mother's sister, said, you better stay on guard, and – a-at the barn where we were sleeping. She wasn't afraid that the villagers will kill us, she was afraid that they'll come and rob us at that time. Because we didn't know about killing that much, that the ger – that there were German and Jew, was n-no human being. So, anyway, they – as, they said, we don't have any guns, how we will protect ourselves? She said take those – I forgot what you – that you cut things?

Q: The scythes?

A: Yeah. That you cut the – the corn or the [indecipherable]

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Q: Yeah.

A: That's a very sharp thing.

Q: Oh, the scythe.

A: Yeah, and it's like this and like this. And it's a sharp one. And stand – change over and stand on guard at the house, and the barn. This was heroic on her part. I mean, a foresight, to do it –

Q: Right.

A: – as a woman.

Q: And so which members of the family were standing guard that night?

A: I – well, there were boys there, so it was either **Asael** or **Zus** or **Tuvia**. They were the older ones, because you know, I mean the oldest at that time. **Avram**, who already was in – the younger one, one was killed. He was grabbed at one time. Anyway, at that time on the – he wasn't killed yet, you know, but he wasn't there because he was married and lived in **Novogradok**. So anyway, that was my experience, to fight, you know, instilled.

Q: And then – and then – so that's right from the beginning. And then you – after the bombing stopped, you –

A: Then we moved back, yeah, we went back. Our house was bombed out. We had certain valuables. We had the basement that had water, so my mother threw in the

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candlesticks and all those valuables, that – I almost – we weren't that comfortable financially, but certain valuables. And we went to live with our uncle. Our uncle came there too. There was an uncle, my mother's brother, who lived in **Novogradok**. He came at that time too, with us.

Q: And his name was?

A: **Yoshke**, yeah. **Yoshke Milalevitch**(ph), my mother's maiden name. And we, after, of course, our house bo – house was bombed out, and this was a two family house, we – he invites us to live with them. So we lived there for a number of months, until the end of the year of 1941.

Q: And then December '41, I know this is a very –

A: Right. Yes.

Q: – painful day.

A: Och.

Q: But –

A: They were – he – we had to go to the courthouse.

Q: And how were you dressed when you went to the courthouse? Do you reme –

A: We were carrying everything we had, you know. Let me just think one moment, to sort of put my – according not to jump back from – it wasn't like yesterday.

Q: Right, none.

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A: It was in '41. We took everything we could from the house and we were marching to that courthouse, everybody. And I was put in with **Kagan(ph)** at that time, since you know, **Kagan(ph)**, in the same room. We were there in one room, maybe 10 - 15 people. More than that, yeah.

Q: And how long did they keep you in the courthouse?

A: With us, it was in until December. December, the – the – I have it in my book when it was the date, I don't remember offhand.

Q: Right. But were you in that room for hours, for days?

A: For a few days. I think two days to be exact. Two or one day, I'm not sure. But it's in the book. And the book is, you know, correct, because I – I had to check it out with my **[indecipherable]** exactly. And they took us out in the courtyard, and they were – the army trucks were **[indecipherable]** and getting in the army trucks. Step in the army truck, step in the army truck. And that's – we didn't ac – they said they taking us to work, you know? And then I saw one of the girls, she was older than I, I was at that time more than 15 – 16 probably, not quite. So anyway – maybe 16, because my birthday's December the third, so I must have been 16 in '41. Yes. We can figure it out. If I made a mistake, you'll forgive me.

Q: Yeah.

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A: You'll correct it. So, I see they're taking everyone on the truck, and my little sister, who was almost 11 – 10 - 11, so she said, Ma, I want to live a little longer, let's go to the back. Let's go to the back. So we're pushing ourselves to the back, because it was a – loads of people, you know, a whole town of people. They would take it on the army truck, and bring out more from the – from the courthouse. So anyway, we were pushing ourselves to the back. And just so happened, after a f-few minutes, it worked very – they were very well organized. You couldn't lie down on the floor, they killed you on the floor.

Q: Was the –

A: On the cart – in the courtyard.

Q: Was it just Germans who were doing this, or did they have local helpers, were there collaborators also?

A: At that time only Germans. German army. Army people. So, anyway, I see a – that in a little while, like we were pushing ourselves in the back of the crowd. So I see a **stabsleiter, Wolfmeyer**(ph) was his name. I'll never forget that. My father worked for him, and I worked in the garden. So I ran over to him with such a powerful – you know, a girl of 16, and grabbed him by the belt, because I figure they're gonna kill me anyway. I figured – I knew they killing. So I grabbed him by the belt, by the – by the way, on the buckle of the belt was written, God is with us.

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You know? That's how much God was with them. So I said, my father's the only bookbinder in [indecipherable] I didn't know any German. You'll need in – him. And I worked in your garden. Yeah, **wir brauchen haben. Brauchen haben?** So I started screaming, Ma! Ro – and the people who were standing closer to me were saying, say that I'm your mother. You want to save your own. Ma! **Riva** was on – my sister's name, **Miriam**, we're saved. They couldn't hear us because it was maybe over a thousand people. Maybe in front of them was maybe a few hundred, you know, because it's a very, very large courthouse – court –

Q: Was a courtyard?

A: Courtyard. As a matter of fact, I have to mention it, because it's there already, that's what **Kagan**(ph) told me, he built a museum there on the courtyard. And he, of course, has my information because he wanted to put in there. So anyway, not the information I'm giving you.

Q: Right.

A: It's different. So yes, he gave us two Germans – one German to take us to the living – back to the 700 that at that time survived. And I started kissing the German, I said, I'm telling you the truth, my mother and my two sisters are here. And I – I threw myself on this German, a young soldier. So another German rans – runs over, **rassen sünde [speaks German]**. You're gonna be killed like a Jew. Because he let

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me do it. And of course he took us to the living. He say – he apologized in German, I didn't know German. Cause I really was on top of him, grabbing him and telling him, here, I'll show you the truth, you know. I was a child. So he took us out to the living, and **Kagan**(ph) knows about it, because in that – there are – make the copy, he knows he was there, we were in the same room.

Q: So, it was you and your father –

A: And that's it. My – my little chil – little children, they were little children with my mother, were pushed on the – on the army truck to be killed, and they were killed.

Q: And your brothers had already tried to run away before this.

A: Yeah, right, and they were killed. But my mother just so happened, knew, because you know, one of the White Russian nis – policeman said, your two – two boys were killed this morning, you know. And she knew, but she knew that her – and you take it the way it is. She suffered a great deal. So that's how I basically sur – not – yeah, basically. But then, I could have been killed again.

Q: Right. So after the selection, there's this small ghetto, and you're there with your father.

A: Right.

Q: And what sort of work were you doing in this ghetto?

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A: Oh, my father was still working outside of town, in the army barracks there. And I was working for a Polish engineer who worked for the Germans. He was building roads for them. I was working about seven months for him. And then they forbade Jewish girls –

Q: This was Mr. **Foltanski**?

A: So you prepared the list. Yes, Mr. **Foltanski**. Mrs. and Mr. **Foltanski**. I cooked for them, and I – I do the – I – I did – I'm sorry, see. I did everything I was told.

Q: And what – can you describe what sort of people they were. I mean, you write about it very beautifully in the book, but can you talk about it?

A: Yes, they were very nice to me. If not for them I wouldn't survive at that time. And my – of course – and my schoolteacher that I met after the war again. So, of – I worked for them just like a slave. And I learned how to do the wash by hand, and I'm gesturing, that's how we used to rub it on that thing. And helped to cook and helped to serve and clean up and tha – they lived in a Jewish, beautiful apartment, a spacious apartment, because this was a Jewish house, and they got it because he worked for the Germans.

Q: Had your family known him before the war?

A: Nobody knew him. We were a few girls that sent from the ghetto, and he select me, you know, we were **[indecipherable]** my girlfriend was there and myself and

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another girl. And he said, well, you will remain, you know. He interviewed me, interviewed them. Interview was based on what family you come. They were from richer families, so they figured probably – he was engineer and in – an educated person, he figured from the richer family they must have had maids. And I told him my father was a bookbinder, and I worked to help my father, and what I told you. So he said, **Esia**, so that's how I got to work for them, about seven months. And then they forbade Jewish girls to work in Germans' houses. You know, they felt that they – they might weaken and save those people, not only girls, men too. Stop working in the – he was engineer and the – the people that worked for the Germans. He build roads for them, they should be able to go through. So anyway – and I always had in my mind, I hope there will be a day that I'll be able to help them, because, you know, that I'll survive. But at that time, there was no – I – no way that I'll survive. So, I was in the ghe – no, I have to backtrack. I – they said to me, the **Foltanskis**, whenever you hear that they killing Jews in the ghetto, come running to us and we'll try to help you.

Q: How hard was it to get from the ghetto – outside the ghetto? Was it a wire, or was it an open ghetto? How were you able to leave –

A: It was wires all around.

Q: So to get from the ghetto to their house, you went through a gate, or –

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A: The gate, yeah, yeah. That was legal, I go – I'm going to work.

Q: Right.

A: And work we – we weren't allowed to walk on the sidewalk; the middle of the street. And nothing is exaggerated here, take my word for it. So, just painful to talk about it. So they said that I should come running to them. And I worked on that particular day out of town, also in the army – they had for the army, special place to work, where they stayed. The army people, the German army. So, I had to clean there, the – the – you know, the cabins, whatever it was. And, like he gave me the leeway, come running to us and we will save you. So, I un – I heard, somebody said that there will be a **shreeta**(ph), which means they will kill the Jews –

Q: Massacre.

A: – you know, it's a **shreeta**(ph).

Q: About what month was that? Was this the – I know there was an action – **akcja** in th – August. Was this the summer **akcja** or the winter one?

A: It was – it wa – must have been in August.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Because, when I'll tell you more, it – I think it's going to August. So I come, I – I take off my jacket with the Star of **David** that I had on both sides, on the back and the front, and I come running to their house. And she, Miss **Foltanski** puts on her

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coat on me. Oh, you don't look Jewish, she said. Don't worry, you will survive the – you know. And I started to cry. I said, my father's probably killed, I have no one. I mean, what's the surviving? And he had a gun on his desk. He said, I can kill you, nobody will do anything to me, I can kill you here, if you want to run to the ghetto. I said, I'm gonna go to ghetto, and I'll see if my father survived. So, he said, I can kill you here, it's just the same. And nobody would do a thing to him. A Jewish girl came bothering me? You know? So, anyway, she gave me, and I simmered down for life. So I – I put on her coat, and she gave me some confidence by saying you don't look Jewish and this and that. And there was a field, and a ditch in the field. So, she said, go there, and I'll bring you tomorrow some food. So I went there. She knew – she pointed where the part is, and you know, there were corn that were camouflaging me, and there was a – a little di – ditch – ditch, you call it a ditch. So I lied in that ditch, and I was saying the **Sh'ma**, because I knew the meaning of the **Sh'ma**. I have it in the book in English, a few words, hear oh God. And I said **Sh'ma** a whole night, until I fell asleep. The next day she brings me some food, Mrs. **Foltanski**. And she throws it in a beautiful wide circle, never forget **[indecipherable]**. And she puts the best food there. The best was a salami, you know. You didn't even ask if it was kosher then. A salami, and some other food, I don't recall exactly, but I remember the salami because she slice it up, you know?

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So, I did – of course I was hungry, I start eating, I ate. And I – I was very thirsty. She forgot to give the sa – me some water, you know? She meant well, because she could have gotten killed. She threw it and she disappeared. So I ate this, and then the other day, I figured, I must go to the pump. We didn't have like a – to get water, or – closer. So, I had to cross a street, and cross a few houses – I mean, pass by a few houses and get a drink of water. So I – I went there – I mean, I was going to cross the street to get from the pump some water. So of course, I couldn't because one of the people that I walked by, one of the neighbors, I said, can I get a f – a little bit of water from you? And so she sends a policeman to – she said, oh, a Jewish girl just went. So I ran back to that ditch, and he was yelling, we'll kill you anyway, we'll find you. So – we know, she said in a – in a navy blue coat. So I threw out the coat, because I heard her. Wasn't a long coat, a short coat. And I put – run into that ditch. So they started shooting, they didn't – there was corn, high corn, they didn't see the ditch. So I survived that night, and then I went the next morning – no, I didn't go to the pump the next morning, because I knew that she is gonna – but again, I figured, I have to take a drink of water before I get killed. The idea was to go. I get up and I see my teacher cutting the corn, **Fiedrowiczowa**, I remember her name. So, I said, **Pani Fiedrowiczowa**, in Polish. I am very thirsty. Can you bring me some water? Oh, I'll bring you some water. Don't go too far. Bring me – so she

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brought me some water. And the next – so I drank, drank the water. And then the next day was Sunday. This was Friday – I mean Saturday, and the next day was Sunday. So I said, well, it's after the action, they called it an action. I'll go to my neighbors' house, who were Christians, and they were nice people, I said, and they will help me out to get to the ghetto and see if my father is alive. Because I still felt, why survive, I'll be killed anyway, you know, even though at 16, I felt this way because I was suffering my little girls – little girls, my little sister, the other sister, they were questioning it and they got killed. So what am I so special, you know? So then they – that was Sunday morning, and I said th – to the teacher, to **Pani Fiedrowiczowa**, I said, I'm going to go to that neighbor. I'm a little repetitious, but forgive me because I can't think straight when I think about it. So she said, no, you can't go. I said, why not? So, she said, it's Sunday, you're not dressed right, you cannot go to your neighbor. You'll go tomorrow, Monday. So I figured, she means well. So, of course I didn't go. And Monday morning she brought me eggs, and – and water to drink, and she was very, very nice. So Monday morning, I went to my neighbor. And my neighbor was next to my uncle's house, you know. My uncle got killed, they all got killed. So I said to her – I knew that he – she has – they were villagers, but they were police, that she's not gonna send me a policeman that'll take me to the Germans. I somehow have the confidence in her as a neighbor. And

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sure enough, the confidence was right. But the police said – two policemen she has ha – she had, from the village, said to me, well, you're alone? I said no, I have my father. I didn't know if he survived. We need 200 rubles for this, to take me to the ghetto, because in a way, they are taking a chance. So yeah, my father's alive, he'll gi-give you the money. My father didn't have any money, but they took me to the ghetto through the entrance, and they said that the Germans said that they should take me to the ghetto, I still can work and so on. So – and then my father, luckily, survived.

Q: So what was your reaction when you saw your father?

A: Oh, I was so happy. I was praying to God all the time that he should be alive. So, anyway, he didn't have any money, so he went out. I said, you must get the money for hi – the – he went out, he was a very honest man and in a small town you know each other. So he borrowed some money from a few people and he paid them off, the police. So they left me there, with – of course in the ghetto. There was still about 200 people or thereabout, because they separated later, and oh, it's a long s –

Q: So, how long did you then remain in the ghetto?

A: I don't want to make any mistakes, so I'm thinking. I remained in the ghetto, I guess for – well, I was seven months – not for – for a short period of time. Because

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there was my girlfriend's father, who was also from a village, and I found out that they are going go to the **Bielskis**. And my father didn't want to leave the ghetto.

Q: And at the time – so, let's talk about now the escape from the ghetto and going to the **Bielskis**. Did you realize that your cousins were forming a partisan group, or did you just say, I want to get out of the ghetto and go to the woods?

A: No, no, no, no, nobody knew it. When I went there, there were over 20 people there. And there was already from the other family, from the other villages, they came, they joined them, that –

Q: So I know there was a –

A: [**indecipherable**] the one that's in the picture, she came from –

Q: You talk that there was a big of a te – a tension about whether it was safer to stay or safer to escape. Can you talk about that tension, about deciding whether or not to remain in the ghetto?

A: Well, we were afraid, I was afraid they'll kill us on the road like they killed my brothers, you know. They'll recognize it. But then I thought it over. I thought it over that this man, **Gutel(ph) Gutel(ph) Birkowski(ph)**, he lived i – also was born in one of the villages there, and he knew his way how to go. And then it was a – we had already one trusted Gentile, **Kozlowski(ph)**, that already tried to get, because **Tuvia** wanted as mu – many Jews from the ghetto as he could get out.

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Q: So, who – describe this – you say that it was December that you left the ghetto, how did you manage to sneak out of the ghetto, how did you go, what path, or –

A: We went at night, and this **Gutel**(ph) and his wife and his sister-in-law, these were the four people, right, including me. So, he broke – he took a tool and he broke the part of the fence, and we crawl over. And like, he know my father didn't join me then. He didn't want to go.

Q: How long a walk was it to get from the ghetto to the woods?

A: Oh, 15 miles, 15 miles, but he n – we went through the woods. There were woods, you know, it wasn't like a – you know, streets here, and even the **Pelham** Parkway, you know, you see woods too, from the side. So we went through those woods, just to give you an example. And we came to this **Kozlowski**(ph), who was a person who we trusted, he knew where he is and so on, and then the **Bielskis** came and picked us up from there, or they send someone, you know, from the partisans, I don't recall exactly if they ca-came or they sent someone. And we went to the woods where they had their base. And we were only 25 people including us then. And there was no – I mean, nobody had an idea that we'll have a group and we'll have a partisans and this and that. We were just going into the woods, not to be killed. So this was at that time, the idea, that they knew the woods like, you know, like I know how to go to **Pelham** Parkway, you know, to the parkway there.

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Q: So, in the initial stage, when there was just the group of 25, what was your job in the woods?

A: Well, cooking. Cooking and standing. After that I didn't get any – specially help to cook, because I didn't have any arms, nothing. And trying to get my uncle, who is still alive and his family was intact, from the ghetto. But there were tremendous opposition, because this was a **Miriam** there, my little cousin, who was only five years old. So they figured we change places at night, and during the day, she's going to cry and so on. They didn't – they – they were fighting – not fighting, you know, physically. But **Tuvia**, how can you bring a five year old girl here? And the other cousins of mine, my – I have to backtrack. My uncle was a machinist. He used to repair things is – in **Novogrudok**, like machines and all. He was very – a machinist I would call it, I don't know how to say it, was that he would fix bicycles, and he would fix machines, sewing machines and typewriters, you know. He – that was his job in **Novogrudok**. He had already the offices **[indecipherable]** practice and **[indecipherable]**. So anyway, I said, well, he's – going on – he's still young. He was young, about 40 ad – odd years old, my uncle, maybe younger. My uncle and aunt and their three children. And I was really throwing myself on the floor, I have no family, you know, only my si – yeah, I had tro – I have to backtrack about my father, he didn't want to come out. He said, what are you bringing me there, they

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should kill me like a dog and leave me in the woods? No – no Jewish burial, you know. It was a – a tragedy just to – to be there, to him. But at one time, I have it in my book, I had to write a letter to him, a threatening letter, that I'm not going to be your daughter any more if you don't come out. So he came out. And –

Q: And the cou –

A: – then I – tha-that was before my uncle. See, I skipped that part with my father. Anyway, and then **Tuvia** made a decision, yes, we need him. And he helped me out. I kissed him, I hugged him, cause I wanted to save them. He was in – see, we had two ghettos in **Novogrudok** later on. They divided – there was like a working camp. Not like, because if you read about **Novogrudok**, and there are a number of people, about 80, who went through a tunnel to the **Bielskis** later on.

Q: And was your father part of the group of 80, or he came earlier?

A: Part of the group of who?

Q: Part of the group that tunneled out of the ghetto?

A: No, no, no, he came much earlier. He came maybe a ma – not even a month after I left, because it was – I wrote him a letter that I don't want to know him, you know.

Q: So, describe what it was like – life was like in the **otriad**. You're in the forest.

Was there the sense of constant fear that you had in the ghetto, or were you able to relax at all, or –

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A: Was a different fear, you know? There was the fear you're gonna get killed, you're Jewish, there's no two ways about it. In the woods, if the – the villagers would say, well, we saw – they're a Jewish group, you know. Because how would the Germans know that we were like in a jungle – later on we were like in a jungle-like woods. But at first the woods, they all knew the woods. Like in **Stankievicz** they were surrounded by woods, where my uncle and aunt lived. We weren't far from that place, because they knew the woods there, very well. I mean the **Bielskis**. So we knew it's safer than to be any other place, and that's what they knew at that time. And then, of course, they found us out, and we had to run in more dense woods, and that's when we ran away to the **Nalibocka Pushcha**, it was called in Polish, which was a jungle-like woods, very dense woods.

Q: So what wou –

A: Not far we could – from **Minsk**, not far from that part.

Q: Can you sort of describe the community, what it was like, what **Tuvia** was like, this leader, the governance, what people did for –

A: Later on?

Q: The development, how he developed as a leader, what were – your impression was.

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A: My impression, I was very impressed with them. As – the movie shows a little different. Did you see the movie, “**Defiance**?”

Q: Yeah.

A: Never happened that they fought. I never saw it.

Q: So **Zus** and **Tuvia** stayed together?

A: Oh, well maybe they had disagreements at times, but not fighting like they – because what was he fighting? He didn't want any more – I mean, the idea was that **Zus** didn't want any more people out, even though his grandchild says differently. He was against it, for take out the people. That's – this they show in the movie, and this was true, because there were money – many people, like women that couldn't go on missions. Well, the men had to bring the food, and this was right, what he did, like in the movie that they show. Because they were rebelling, the men. And it was called the boyfriend in Russian, different name. And of course, you go and you risk your life to get from the – from the villagers, the food. Although they had – what should I say? **Tuvia** said, don't take any cows from any villagers that have only one cow. You have to, you know, you have to use judgment. But still, they went there, and they risked their lives to get it, so they want it for their girlfriends, it was a business with girlfriends. I didn't have a boyfriend, so –

Q: What was it li – is it – we were talking about –

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A: I was a **Beis Yaakov** girl at that time.

Q: So talk about the – what was going on with the women. Were women treated very differently than men? I know that you were one of the only women with a gun.

A: Yeah.

Q: How –

A: And **Itka**.

Q: And **Itka**. So just co –

A: Later it ca-came to us.

Q: Yeah, describe what it was like as a female partisan as opposed to just a member of the group.

A: Well, females had to stand on – on guard, too, you know, they taught us how to do things.

Q: Who taught you how to shoot?

A: Oh, there was a – an army man, abramov – **Abramowicz**(ph) – abramov – and that was yesterday, I forget. **Abramowicz**(ph), I think. **Bramowski**(ph), **Abramowicz**(ph). He wasn't teaching only me, he was teaching the young men too. I was the only girl at that time. And **Itka** came from a – a Russian group, so she learned there. Russian Jewish, I don't know, from Russian group, she came later.

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So, but he taught us. **Abramowicz**(ph) was his name, and he was taught in the army.

Q: Did anybody – any of the men object to the fact that you had a gun? Did they feel it was being wasted on a woman, when you obtain a weapon?

A: No, I didn't get from **Tuvia** the gun, or from anyone. My uncle later on gave me, put together from – he proved himself a very important person, my uncle, so go figure out, they didn't want him. He was a mechanic in th – he wa – all the Russian partisans will bring their guns, and – and what do you call the other rifles, I forget. More than a rifle – the heavy gun. He knew how to fix the guns. So in his mind, as a thank you, and I always wanted to be – to go and to – to take **nekoma**. That was in my mind, I was –

Q: Revenge.

A: – it was engraved, revenge. So anyway, whenever he would fix for the Russians their rifles, and sometimes he would – like they would bring two, three li – rifles to be fixed, and he would say, well, this one cannot be fixed. So he would save some of the – as a thank you to me, because he knew how I felt about the rifle, he would save a part and put it together. At first I didn't have a rifle. I had a rifle, yes, but it was like cut off, like the people who go and – and they just want to rob you, they come with certain rifles that are shorter. But then he got me a Polish rifle, Polish, an

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army rifle. Put together for me later on a gun. So that's how I got my rifle, from my uncle. Because your – that was a very intelligent question. The preference was to give it to the men, they should have a rifle, a rifle was like gold. So this is – excuse me. Oh. You know what I need?

Q: Should we pause. **[tape break]** So, I'm wondering if you can describe what – a little bit more of how the **otriad** functioned as a community. Did you have the sense that it was a town, a-among itself, or is that the glorified version of the **Bielskis**?

A: Glorified. Some of it later, yes. But – yes, I'll gi – I have you – you know, if I wouldn't get this stupid headache, I'm gonna just take an aspirin in a little bit. Then – you know, because that gloried part – not glorified, we had this, but not to the extent, the way. It was organized in a nice way. You call it glorified, I don't know.

Q: Like was there a – s-social activities in the woods? Were –

A: Well, men and women were together without marriages. My father did one marriage. **[indecipherable]** you know **[indecipherable]**. And that was one couple. And this in the movie, it was different. I am – calmed it down a little bit, because if you would see it at first – toned it down, I should say, through channels. It was a girl with a white dr – dress, and with this part on their head and everything. I said, why did you do it? We didn't have it. I – I got very angry that they are glorifying it. And then the main part that got me from the movie was that I suffered, because I

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reminded myself, when they went through the water. That really killed me while I was watching it.

Q: So dis –

A: Because they had my [indecipherable] I'm gesturing, in my bra, and they all got [indecipherable] from my hometown, from my mother, from my sisters, brothers and so on. And we went up to here in water. You know, it wasn't exaggerated, I was there.

Q: Right.

A: A-And this is where – the part that I thought that we're gonna drown. We survived, God was with us, it seems. And when we went out from the water, there was, you know, a coal, that coal, meaning that they war – you can – from woods, coal.

Q: Charcoal?

A: No, that the Germans were sort of making a fire.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: So they – the parts were still hot there, when we went out through the water. They would have killed us. It just so happened – cause it was regular army, they killed a few people. In my book, my girlfriend's mother was killed. And we were running back and forth on this [indecipherable]. But, what happened was, we had a

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man that knew the woods very well there, where we were going through the water. How would we know that that's a safe place? **Tuvia** didn't know that there is a safe place there. One of the men who was working before the war, you know, to get woods, to – to build the houses, we had wooden houses in **Novogradok**. As a matter of fact, my mother and father, we had a wooden house. We didn't have made out of brick, the house. So the wood had to come from the woods, and these jungle-like woods, that person worked there. And he knew the way with – to go through water.

Q: How long were you actually in the water?

A: Well, I would say, two days. Overnight, sort of. Not for long we were going. And of course we – there was no food in this. And, you know, there are a lot of details that you can't – partially, I forgot already, but I do remember this distinctly, because when my grandson and myself were sitting and watching the movie, he saw how I felt when the water part came. And then the director of the movie called me, what do you think, Mrs. **Shor**? Because he asks me. So, my grandson said, Grandma, don't go now. You are not at the state of mind to – because I was crying all the time that p – when that part came. It was so real to me, you know? So, I didn't go to the director at that time. He interviewed me, but I didn't go the director.

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I am very surprised I didn't stay in the movie that long. I feel that – well, who am I?

I should have been longer.

Q: Let me ask about another **[indecipherable]** in your book, you talk about having gone on one raid with some Soviet soldiers, and –

A: Oh, that was –

Q: Can you describe that?

A: That was brutal. That was brutal. In just the way it's in the book, what can I tell you? I didn't exaggerate anything. That was brutal. Because there is a part that I – I don't have a good sense of direction even now. So, I figured, oh my God, I'll be killed like a dog and thrown in there. But God was with me. I believe very much. I was – I'm not as religious as I should be, but God was with me that time. If he could show me the way back to the villager, and I should say that I have a gun, which I didn't, you know, and scare him to take me to the **Niemen**, to that river, that was heroic, because they ask for a drink of water, and they dra – dry **[indecipherable]** they – they – yeah, I mean, drive their horses – horse and wagon away. And I didn't see them when I came out. And I wanted to help them. And I was brought up that you don't go to bed with anyone. And this was the commander that wanted me. A young girl was – you know, sex, and that's part of it. That was brutal. To leave a girl, that I went with them, and I watched their sick person, you

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know? I went with them because I wanted to revenge, to go and under – because the idea was, they were challenging me. We – they were –

Q: They being Soviet partisans?

A: Right. They were challenging me, they were the same house, and they said, oh, you have a gun, and a – now, that time I had only a rifle. You have a rifle, well, what do you do? Nothing. You don't fight. Come with us and we'll see what a fighter you are. So, in a way maybe I was lucky th – because they could have killed me. Because a man got sick, and I was so disappointed, and they left me with that partisan, to take care of him. It's in the book, and I still remember it like it was yesterday. So, I was with him, and this might have been that that was meant for me. What would I do if they would kill me there? Nothing. Nobody would say a word. But, you know, I – I was challenged by them, that Jews don't fight, and Jewish girls specially don't fight. So that's why I went. Why would I go with them? And I wanted to do something in revenge, what they did to my family and the rest of the Jews. So this was my experience with a – forgot, they were **[indecipherable]** I think. And then the man survived, that I took care of him.

Q: But by and large you stayed on the base, for the most part?

A: I went a few times to get food, because otherwise they – they were saying, she has a rifle, she can – you know, I wanted also to – to go and do something. Because

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this was on my mind, the revenge business. And to help out. So I went a few times, just to get food. One of my friends even said that I went with them and so on, and he's not here any more. You know, even if I would want to say well, here is a witness, there is not.

Q: And so when you went to get f – food, did you actually meet the farmers, or you just –

A: No. I stayed –

Q: Got it.

A: – outside. Yes, I stayed outside. I went with them. That was my group, I had the confidence to go with them. So, there were other things that were brutal too, but what are you gonna do? This is [indecipherable]. I was telling them that at that time we had already a part that the Russians – soldiers were – he was the – **Platon** was the main leader there, his name, I still remember the name, because I was fighting with the Russian, I said, if you do something wrong to me, I'll take you to **Platon**, I will tell him, that what – what you did, you know. I would take the telephone and tell them. But, it was a terrible experience. But later on – you know the story probably, later on [indecipherable] say that **Tuvia** made with him friends and so on, and they – they were – they took away the rifles, the Russian partisans from our boys, 10 boys at one point.

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Q: What po – this is before liberation that they took the rifles away?

A: Oh, way back, when we met **Victor**. I forg – trying to [indecipherable] can't remember the second name, **Victor** was his name. So what happened was, **Victor's** partisans and you know, where **Victor** came from – where they come from, the Russians? They came – they ran away from the – what is called when you are fighting, and you are in a – a group, the – a-as a soldier?

Q: What, the unit?

A: Not from the unit.

Q: The **otriad**?

A: Not from the **otriad**. They ran away from the Germans that captured them. Anyway, **Victor** was there.

Q: Well – well, let me you – you – when we first started out the interview, you said that you actually had very fond memories of what life was like under the Soviets. Were you surprised by –

A: Oh, that was [indecipherable]

Q: – the behavior of the Soviet partisans, having –

A: Oh, very much so.

Q: You expected them to be more sympathetic to Jews, or –

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A: Of course, of course. Many of them were, you know. But **Tuvia** had made up with them later on, because he came out very strong. He said, if you take away the rifles from our boys, they went to fight, or to get some food, it was part of our survival, those boys, 10 boys, took away their rifle. A rifle was like gold. Next time you'll do it – he said, a bullet from a rifle shot from – in Jewish hands can kill just the same as yours. And that it was – he sort of was strong. **Tuvia** was very strong. So, with – then they shook hands and became friends, and so on. And we were friends. And then, of course, it's a little more than that, too. A girl, a this, a that, you know. I don't think you want this [inaudible]

Q: So, if you're to – in retrospect, what do you attribute the success of the **Bielski** group to? Why do you think they were able to accomplish what no other partisan groups, in terms of this large rescue, how do you think –

A: Well, there weren't Jewish groups like ours.

Q: Right.

A: They were always mixed, a few Jews in the Russian partisans, that's where **Itka** was. Well, he was a strong leader. They were army people. **Tuvia** went to the army, **Asael** went to the army, and **Zus** went into the army. Only **Aron**, the younger one – of course, he was younger than I, he lives in – he's still alive, thank God, he lives in **Florida, Aron**. So this were the people who were army people themselves. And

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they – they didn't ha – need training. And I got – not only I, I mentioned the name **Abramowicz(ph)**, so – **Abramowicz(ph)** we called him. And he was teaching, not only **Essie Shor**, I was the only girl, but teaching the other men how to use the rifles that they got.

Q: And in terms of the organization of – the food organization, and the –

A: Distribution?

Q: – house – of distribution, and the housing?

A: I think that was done beautifully. Not thinking that because I'm a cousin. I have a social work degree, and I would put it in the way it has to be put it in, in a delicate way there, I would say something wrong. But no, there was – ther-there was only when – you know, in the movie that they killed that man, they were right, because he wanted only for the girlfriend, for th – him, because he went and he risked his life. The risking, yes, there is the life, but you came back to us, and this was your mission, to go and – and risk your life.

Q: Let me move then to ju – July 1944. How did you realize that your area had been liberated?

A: Oh, well, we had this **[indecipherable]** how did we realize? They – oh yeah, the Germans were retreating. As a matter of a – that's when **Itka** and myself and the Russian partisans, we went together, but we couldn't find the **[indecipherable]** it

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was a regular army. You know, army trained, German army trained people. So, the Russians said, we have to retreat. And we retreated, and we ran after

[**indecipherable**] crossing bridges, you know, through water, back to the base.

When I came on the base – before I came, and **Itka**, they killed my girlfriend's mother, they killed the young **boychik**. They passed our base.

Q: The Germans passed the base?

A: Yes, that's how dangerous it was.

Q: And –

A: And got into the – even to that bunker, to kill that woman. That's how they felt.

Q: And this was just days before liberation, or –

A: Days – days before rebala – though yeah – thi-this is just unimaginable. From one side the Germans were retreating, from the other sides the Russians, to liberate us. And when we – they weren't – **Tuvia** said, we are partisans, in Russian, don't kill us, you know? They saw people there. So that happened in one day. But that girlfriend's mother was killed and 10 people – nine or 10. Nine, I think, I'm not sure, were killed on that very same day.

Q: And did you leave the forest immediately after the Soviets came?

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A: The lib – practically, yes, because we weren't afraid already. Not right away, not the same day, a few days later. Because, you know, we had to be organized even to walk, and so on.

Q: So, you went as a group –

A: Yes.

Q: – back to –

A: Back to **Novogradok**, right.

Q: And what was the reaction of the townspeople when they saw a thousand people march out of the woods?

A: A thousand? There weren't a thousand that were marched down at one time.

Q: Yeah.

A: I would say about 200 were marched.

Q: Okay.

A: People went in different, because they came from different towns.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: So they went, and – and **Tuvia** said, you can – now you're free. So some people went here and there. I – I questioned the thousand, but –

Q: Oh really? How many people do you think were in the woods?

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A: I – well, we started to, not with a thousand, but later on, of course, there are another group that joined us, so that's what made it about the thousand. I don't know. You know, you get th-the general idea, but we weren't a thousand that came into **Novogradok**, to my hometown.

Q: Uh-huh. And what was the reaction of the Polish community when even just a hundred or 200 of you came – showed up? Were they surprised, or had they known you had survived?

A: I was even afraid then, to be honest with you. But then we – I still had my rifle in the house, because we had to re – turn in – the Soviets wanted us turn in the rifles. And I went to school with **Itka**, for a short period of time.

Q: With Polish students?

A: Yes, with Polish students, Russian teacher. Teachers were Russian, and they were teaching us Russian at that time.

Q: And did they –

A: Because the Russians retreated.

Q: And did they talk about the war, or it was as if you – people just put it back and you were si – going back to 1941?

A: Heavy questions.

Q: Yeah.

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A: And I don't want to give you misinformation, you know.

Q: Right.

A: Cause who can remember this –

Q: Right. Yeah, but there are no memories of what the Polish students were talking to you about when you – walking to the classroom?

A: They were trying on my dr – my coat. Yeah, they loved it, because it was army-like, you know. And I wasn't a long time there. I went to school maybe a half a year, thereabouts, I don't recall exactly.

Q: And then you left **Poland** for –

A: Right, for – left that part, and we went to **Lódz**, and that's where I got married, too. A large city in **Poland**. And this was **Belarus**, they call it later. Now it's a independent country called **Belarus**. They took apart **Poland** after the war.

Q: An-And then from **Lódz** you went with your husband –

A: Yes.

Q: – to **Fernwald**?

A: Yes.

Q: And your father?

A: And we were there close to four years. Yeah, with my father, right. I think you have enough information.

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Q: It's enough information. Okay, so in that case, I think we'll –

A: Read my book.

Q: – stop. This has been in interview with **Esia Shor**. Thank you.

Conclusion of Interview