

Speak. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. John Migut on February 2nd, 2015 in Elk Grove, Illinois. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Migut, for agreeing to speak with us today. I very much appreciate the time that you're taking to share your memories.

And before we go into what happened during the war years, I want to get a sense of what life was like in the pre-war years. So I'll ask you a lot of questions about that.

And I'm going to start off with the very beginning and the very basic ones. Could you tell me what was your name at birth?

My name at birth was Jan Migut.

Jan Migut. And when were you born, your date of birth?

My date of birth is January 15, 1934.

January 15. So you've just had a birthday recently.

Yeah.

Happy birthday to you. And where were you born? What was the place that you were born in?

I was born in Poland in a place called Lukawiec. It's a small village near Rzeszow, Poland. And we lived on the farm over there.

So Lukawiec, was that a village or a town or a settlement?

Lukawiec is a village about 10 miles from the city of Rzeszow, southeast Poland.

Oh, it was in southeast Poland?

Yes.

OK. Tell me, what was your father's name and your mother's name?

My father's name was Jacenty Migut. And my mother's name was Jadwiga Migut.

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Yes, we had seven kids in the family.

Wow.

We had four brothers and three sisters.

Could we go through the list there too?

Yes.

Who's the oldest? Who was the youngest?

The oldest one was Ted. He was about 19 when they took us out. And then there was Mary. And there was Janina. And there was Joe. And there was Stanley and, of course, me, . John, and Bernice.

So you were the second to the youngest?

That's right.

And you've given me the English names, right? The English names of your siblings?

Yes.

Tell me, what were they in Polish?

OK. In Polish, there was Tadeusz, Marysia, Jasza, Jã³zio, Staszek, Jan, i Bronia.

Bronia? OK. And what do you remember of your father's history, that is, before you were born, before he had children? Where was he from? What was his life like? What did he do?

Well, as far as I know, my father was in the Austrian army, because that was the time where Poland was occupied by Austria, Germany, and Russia. And so I think that sometime in the 1900s, Poland got their independence. And they called it Galicia. It's part of Poland where we lived. It used to be Galicia.

So my father, when he came out from the army, as far as my mother told me, he was a farmer. He opened up a farm over there and started raising a family.

So that's after the First World War?

Before, it was before.

Oh, before? Before the First World War?

Before. Yeah.

Ah-ha.

Before. But what happened a year before we were taken out to Siberia in February 10th, 1940, my mother wanted our father to move to the eastern part of Poland. Those lands were given, annexed, to Poland after the First World War. And the military man, there was the service, like my father, could buy the land for small price. So we moved over there to a place called Liczkowce, the village of Liczkowce, near Ternopil, which is Ukraine now.

I see.

And from there, we were taken out to Siberia.

We'll get to that part. We're still talking pre-war right now, before Siberia.

Yeah. OK.

But you mentioned your father served in the Austria-Hungarian army, yes?

Yes, he was in Austrian-Hungarian army.

OK. What rank did he have there?

I think he was a Lieutenant.

That's quite high.

Yes.

That's quite high. And did he join the Polish army when there was a fight for independence or not?

No, he got married after he came out of the service. He was pretty young. And my mother was young too. They got married right away.

I see. Do you remember the date of his birth, your father, the year of his birth?

1898, I believe it is.

Oh, he was very young then, if he was serving in the-- he would have been--

I think he was 17 when he went there or something.

Yeah. Yeah, that's very young. That's very young. Did he ever tell stories about what World War I was like?

I don't remember too much talking with my father, because I was at the bottom of the list with the kids. My older sisters or brothers would probably tell you more about it. But I had no chance to discuss these things with him.

OK. Well, yeah, you had a large family.

Yeah. Yeah, it was a big family.

So tell me, what are your memories of the place that you grew up before you moved eastwards? What kind of a village was it?

OK. I grew up in that small village called Lukawiec.

Lukawiec.

Lukawiec, which is-- like I said-- it's northwest, about 10 miles northwest of Rzeszow, Poland. And we had a farm over there, big farm, with the cows and the horses and pigs and all kinds of things that the farmers have. The farmer was cultivating the land over there.

What did your father grow mostly?

He used to grow the wheat. So he was a wheat farmer, potatoes and beets, beets and potatoes, things like that.

Did he sell any of this? Or was this to keep the family fed? Was all the produce that you produced, the food that you produced, consumed by your family?

No, that was not for sale. It was just strictly for the family. Yeah, he raised it for the family. And for the winter, they stored in underground bunkers, like cabbage and beets and potatoes. They stored for the whole family.

Well, how many hectares did the farm have? Do you remember?

I'm not sure. But it was-- I don't know-- maybe close to 100.

That's a lot.

Yeah. That was a big land.

That's a lot. Yeah. And do you remember the house that you lived in?

Yes. We had a house, nice house, with the front porch and the big windows and big stove. And the kitchen, there was like made out of granite-- not granite, but--

Stone of some kind?

Stone. It was some kind of stone. And of course, we had a lot of bedrooms for a lot of kids. We had bedrooms for every couple of kids, for two or three kids to the bedroom.

And next to the house, we had a barn, where all the farm animals were. And we had a little garden in the back.

But the house itself was a brand-new house, because my mother said when she was younger, they had a fire in the village where she lived with her mother. So when they got married, they built a new house. So that house was pretty new.

Was it of stone or wood, the house?

It was wood.

It was wood?

It was wood. Yeah.

It was wood. Did you have electricity?

No, we had no electricity there.

What about--

No running water.

No running water?

No, no.

No. OK. Did you have a radio at home?

No, no radio, no.

OK. So how did people get news? What was the source of information about the outside world?

I think that most of the information they got is when they went to church on Sunday. They got it from the priest or something, because the whole village, there was no radio, no--

No--

--information of any kind.

OK. Well, it makes sense. It makes sense that they would get it on Sundays. And why, with 100 hectares of land-- which is a lot-- what was the motivation for your father and your mother to move the family east?

That's because you figure that there were seven children in the family. And you want to give something to every child as

they grow up. So you figure if they move east, then there's going to be a lot of land to divide among the kids later on.

Uh-huh. And do you know how much land they got in the east?

I don't really know. But it probably was more than what we had in the west. I don't really know exactly what it was. But it was more. That's why we went there.

OK. And do you remember the move itself?

I don't remember that much. I was about six years old, so I don't remember everything.

Yeah, sure. So the farm that you had, did you sell it? Or did you still keep it, the one in Lukawiec?

The original farm that we had in the west, my father kept it. And I think he leased it to our cousin. And we had the land over there assigned to me and my sister, Bernice. So when we came to the States over here, my brother Ted, who was in Germany during the war, went back to Poland. He got married. And when they came to visit us here, we assigned that land to him in Poland.

Oh, the one from your original birthplace?

Yeah, that's right.

I see. So he had leased it. Your father had leased it but signed it over to you and your sister to belong to you--

Right. That's right.

--the youngest two children.

Yes.

And then, well after the war, you were able to transfer ownership.

We transferred ownership to our oldest brother, Ted.

To your oldest brother. OK.

Tadeusz.

Tadeusz. Tadeusz was born when? In 1920 or 1919, something like that?

I honestly don't remember. It was one year after they got married. So I think it was about 19-- I don't really know-- 1920 something, maybe--

OK. But he was already a teenager, though, when World War II started.

Yeah, he was 19 years old.

Was he with you in eastern Poland?

I'm sorry?

Was Ted with you in eastern Poland?

No. See the day that the Russians took us out, he went on the bicycle west to visit our grandma. And so when he went

up there to Rzeszow, the Germans caught him. And they sent him to German concentration camp during Second World War.

OK. They sent him to a German-- before we talk about your family, I want to talk about his destiny a little bit.

All right.

If you were in eastern Poland-- I don't know the distances that well. Tell me, again, the name of the village you moved to in eastern Poland.

Oh, the name of the village was Liczkowce.

Liczkowce?

Yeah, near the town of Ternopil--

Near Ternopil.

--which is Ukraine now.

So Ted left there on bike to go to visit your grandmother in Rzeszow, yes?

No. Yeah, around Rzeszow. That's right.

Around Rzeszow. What kind of distance was that? How many kilometers would that have been?

I have no idea but probably in 100 kilometers.

Yeah, it sounds like it. It sounds like it's quite a distance.

I have no idea exactly what it was.

Yeah. And he got there then? He got there?

We didn't hear from him. When we were taken out to Siberia, we didn't hear from him until we got to Africa.

OK. Did you ever have an opportunity to talk with him in detail about what happened to him during the war?

Yes, we did. When he came over here to visit us from Poland, he talked about it. And he said that he was assigned to work on the farm in Germany. He didn't have it too bad, because the Germans used their men to fight the war. And they needed farmers. So they used him as a farmer to help out the Germans' family.

So he wasn't in a concentration camp? He was--

Originally, he was. But they transferred him from the concentration camp to a farm in Germany.

I see. So which concentration camp was he in?

I don't know that.

You don't know that. OK.

No.

You see, in order to get into a concentration camp, you had to have done something. And so I'm wondering, was he involved in any kind of illegal activities, underground resistance?

No, he was not.

He was not. He was not. OK. And did he talk much about conditions in either the concentration camp or in the farm?

He didn't talk too much about concentration camp, because he probably didn't stay there very long. But he did talk about being on the farm. He said that on the farm, he had it very good. They fed him good. Nobody pushed him around. Nobody gave him a hard time. He was just doing the work, cultivating the land for the family, the German family.

And being a farmer's son himself, he knew what to do.

Yeah, he knew what to do.

Yeah. Did he ever say where he was sent, where that farm was located?

Jeez, I don't know. I don't know.

OK. I mean, of course, sometimes it's because you had a totally different destiny. And you were a small child. And sometimes, people talked about things after the war. But they didn't go into such details.

They don't go into details. Yeah, yeah.

That's right.

We thought it was not important at that time.

Yeah. Yeah. So tell me-- let's turn to your mother's side of the family a little bit-- where was she born? And where did she grow up?

Well, she was born around Rzeszow, west of that place where we were taken out. She was around Rzeszow, a village named Lancut, not too far from Lukawiec, where we were born. In fact, it was walking distance--

Oh, really?

--one village next to the other.

So you had a large extended family in that area?

There wasn't a big place. I don't know, maybe 50 families or less, not a big place.

But your family, did you have aunts and uncles and grandparents in the same region, in Lukawiec?

I think that we had a couple aunts over there. But the rest of them, I don't know. I don't remember all of it.

OK. And your mom then, when she grew up there, did she have a higher education?

No, she grew up during the war times, I guess, the First World War and all that. She barely knew how to read and write. She didn't have any college education-- neither had my father-- during the war times, like a lot of people didn't during the Second World War II.

Yeah. Yeah. So had they ever been to-- I'm so sorry that I don't remember--

Liczkowce.

Liczkowce?

Yes.

Before moving there, had either of your parents gone there to take a look to see what the place was like? Or did they buy it sight unseen?

No, there was something. The government handled that situation. So they didn't know what to expect when we move in there. But we moved in there. When we moved in there, the house was already there.

That, I wanted to ask, yeah.

Yeah. I don't know how they arranged it with my father. I have no idea. But when we moved in, everything was there already.

And you moved in 1939?

Yes, 1939.

What month? Do you remember?

It must have been fall or something, because we only stayed there in Liczkowce for when the winter started. And then in February, they took us out. So we didn't stay very long there.

Was it before the war started? Did you move before the war started? The war started September 1st, 1939.

I think it was before. Yes, before the war started. Before '39, September '39, yes.

OK. So it would have been, maybe, in the summertime or something like--

It must have been, yeah. They wouldn't move in the wintertime with that many kids.

Yeah, that's right.

So it must have been summertime.

OK. And what did that place look like? What did Liczkowce's house-- what did your situation there look like?

Well, there was--

Was it a new house?

A small-- a new house, a small, small place. Not too many houses, maybe 10, 15 houses over there, and the road, dirt road. And a lot of people were starting out over there, because there were other Polish families that were transferred to that location, mostly farmers. And everybody was starting a new life, a new land, a new life.

Was it a bigger house than the one you left?

Yes, it was bigger, much bigger, much bigger.

Did it have more amenities? Like, did it have running water or electricity or-- yeah, did it have those things?

Neither place-- neither first one or second location-- had no running water.

OK. Usually, we had wells. But you had to go and pump the water out.

Was that your job?

No, no, I was too small.

Too small. Did anybody have a motor vehicle? Did anybody have a car in these villages?

Oh, no. There was just horses.

Just horses.

There was no vehicles in the whole village then.

OK. How many horses did you have, your family?

I think we had about four horses and six or eight cows, maybe, and pigs and chickens and geese.

Did they move all the way from Lukawiec to Liczkowce?

No. No, they didn't move all the animals. I don't know what they did. They probably sold it or whatever. But when we came to Liczkowce, they started all over again.

So do you remember them getting new animals?

I remember a little goose. The white goose was running around--

Oh, yeah?

--the house all the time. I was chasing it. I had a little horse, little--

A pony?

A pony, yeah. And Father dedicated that pony to me because I was the youngest boy.

Well, that's a treat.

Yeah, so I had a lot of fun with the pony out in the yard.

Yeah?

Yeah.

Did you name it?

No, I don't name for them.

OK. What are some of your earliest memories? They may just be episodic, one thing here, another thing there. But what are some of those that stick in your mind?

You mean when they took us out?

No, before the war--

Before the war?

--everything before the war, everything before the war.

Well, that was on the farm. So it was running loose, playing with the kids, chasing the chickens on the farm, that stick out to me. It was big land. I go outside the barn. And I look out, look around. There's nothing but big land over there and nothing in sight but the land. I says, wow, that looks--

Huge.

--very, very good. Yeah.

Any forests around?

No, there was some trees in the back, way in the back. But there was no forests around, no.

Were you closer to one or another of your siblings? Did you have a particular favorite as you were growing up?

My mother said that the older sibling always took care of the younger one, because their mother was busy working on the farm with the father. So always, the older sister was taking the younger brother, or vice versa, the older child was taking care of the younger child. So actually, I had no favorites. Maybe Bernice, my sister-- Bernice, the youngest one-- we were hanging around most of the time. But she can't remember anything anyways.

OK.

At three years old, she was--

Yeah. Do you remember-- oh, before that, was your family very religious?

Very religious, yes, especially my mother.

Really?

She was. She was praying all the time, doing the rosaries and going to church, very religious, maybe too much of a religion. But it never hurts.

Did the whole family go to church on Sundays?

Oh, yes, yes. My mother had a new pair of shoes. And when she was going to church, she would take-- in the wintertime-- she would take the shoes off and go barefooted, because she was afraid that she was going to ruin the new shoes. Before entering the church, she would put the shoes on.

Did anybody serve as an altar boy?

No. No, we didn't.

OK. OK. What kind of personalities did your parents have? Was one more outgoing than another? Was one more reserved than another?

Personalities?

Mm-hmm.

Well, my mother was a very warm-hearted woman. She was very polite. She never argued with nobody. She didn't push us around. She was hugging the kids. She was like big mama, very, very nice mother.

So there was love around.

Yes.

There was love in the family.

A loving family, yeah.

Mm-hmm. And your father?

And Father, I don't remember my father too much, because he was always working, busy, very seldom in the house. But he was a quiet man. He always agreed with my mother. She was running the show. And he always says, OK, OK. Oh, he agreed with her all the time.

OK. Do you recall the grownups talking about-- if there was no news-- Liczkowce, was there any newspaper or anybody who had a radio there in the next town?

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing at all, just word of the mouth. People, neighbors, come over. They start talking. Maybe somebody heard something they're passing along to somebody else.

And nobody read newspapers?

No.

OK. So how did everybody hear that the war started, that Germany attacked Poland?

Well, my father heard it from some neighbors. They lived the neighborhood. They get together. They talk. And some people told him about it.

Do you remember the day when the war started?

No, I don't remember.

OK. And do you remember when he told the family? Do you remember him coming home and saying, you know?

Yes. He told my mother that moving east would be a bad idea, because the war started. And the Russian border is not too far away from there. So he felt the danger was for the family. He didn't want to move. But my mother insisted.

And later on, she was sorry that she did that. She was pushing and pushing for that move. So finally, he gave in. And he moved. But he knew that was not a good place to move.

Because it was close to the Soviet border?

Because it's close to the border. And the war started. I guess he feared that, from the Russian side, something might happen. And it did.

So what happened?

Well, in February 10th, 1940, the Russians came in.

Excuse me, I have to move back a little bit. Did you see any Russian soldiers when the war soon started? I mean, this war started in September.

No, we didn't see any soldiers until February 10, 1940.

So that meant your village was left alone?

Yes.

Nobody came in?

Nobody came in.

Nothing changed?

Nothing changed.

Wow.

1940, February 10th, that was the first time that we saw the Russian soldiers came in to the Polish people, wherever Polish people-- the Ukrainian people living over there too. So they left Ukrainian people alone. But the Ukrainian guard was working with the Russians, pointing out where the Polish people lived. And so we're taking out those Polish people on this sleds to the boxcars.

Do you remember that day or that--

Oh, yes, I do.

So tell me. Tell me what happened in detail as much as you can remember.

Well, it was early in the morning. It was still dark and a cold morning. It was February 10th. It was very cold, lots of snow on the ground. And somebody was banging on the doors. So my parents jumped up. And they covered us up to try to hide us, because they felt there was something wrong. But they went to the door. And they-- the Russian soldiers-- were up there with the fixed bayonet, banging on the door, and told my parents to open the door.

So when my parents opened the door, the Russian soldiers grabbed my father by the throat, pushed him against the wall. And he told him to keep his mouth shut, because my father was trying to find out what this was all about. And they told him, says, you have maybe 10, 15 minutes to get your things together and pack up. And you're going somewhere. And they wouldn't tell us where we were going to go or what's going to happen.

So my father ask my older sister Marysia to go to the barn and grab some chickens, twist their heads off, put it in the bag for food. And my mother took some bread, put it in the bag. And then they loaded us up, dressed us up-- kids-- loaded us up on the sleds that are waiting. Out the front of the house were the whole horse-driven sleds, big sleds.

Tell me, what time of day was it when this happened?

During the weekday, you mean?

No, I meant was it nighttime? Was it daytime?

Early in the morning, before-- it was still dark in the morning.

So were most people sleeping?

Yes. They came in when most of the people are sleeping, yeah.

OK. So it was towards dawn, before dawn?

Yes, exactly.

And was it still dark out when you left the house?

When we left the house, it wasn't dark. It was daylight coming out.

Dawn was occurring. It was close to dawn.

Dawn occurred, yes.

Yeah. And what other kinds of items were you able to take in that amount of time?

Well, my mother took a lot of blankets and pillows to cover us up, because it was pretty cold outside of that time. And they had some little bread. And the father had those chickens in the bag and all this.

She did what she could to protect us from the cold weather, because they load us up on the big sled, wooden sleds. And Mother covered us up with pillows and blankets just so we wouldn't freeze.

Did you take anything? You were a little boy.

No. No.

You didn't take anything?

They just told us to get on the sleds and sit over there. Mother was taking care of us.

Did you get dressed up out of your pajamas and into some other clothes?

No, no. We had to dress up in a hurry. We did a pretty fast job.

What was the atmosphere like? I mean, was it chaos? Was there screaming? Was there crying--

No--

--in the house?

--they told us to keep to keep our mouth shut. They wouldn't let us say anything. My mother was crying. My father had tears in the eyes. I remember I looked at him, and he couldn't say a word. I guess he knew what this was all about, because he was in the army. So he knew what to expect from the Russians.

And did your siblings say anything?

No, nobody said a word. I think my sisters, some of them, were crying. Bernice didn't know what this was all about, the youngest one. And the oldest, Janina and Mary, they were helping our mother to take care of the smaller kids. So that was very sad. I remember that part really good. It was very sad part of my life.

Do you remember the trip from the house on this sleigh?

The trip was not very long, because the railroad station was not too far from our house, and so, maybe, half an hour to an hour at the most.

Were other families on these sleighs? Or were other families also being taken?

Yes, there are many sleds from our villages. Yeah, I don't know how many, maybe a dozen or more, a dozen or more. Mostly Polish families, all Polish families that lived in that village, were taken out. The Ukrainian people were left alone. They didn't take them out.

But you say somebody who was a local Ukrainian had pointed out the families?

Yeah, they had spotters or whatever you call them. They knew where the Polish family lived, so they was pointing out to the Russian soldiers. This house, Polish people live in this house. So the sleds pulled up by those houses and picked us up.

Did you see this person? Or did you hear about him?

I saw him when he came in with the Russians. But I don't know how to describe him.

OK. No--

He was--

--of course, it's chaotic.

--middle-aged man with a big mustache.

OK. But you could see there was not only Russian soldiers but somebody else who came by to--

The Ukrainian people were working with the Russian soldiers too.

OK. Now, had life in the-- you hadn't seen any Russian soldiers until then-- but from September to February, had life changed? Had some of the local Ukrainians or maybe even Polish communists or someone, had they changed what village life was like?

Well, yeah, it did change, because of us being the first ones in the area of the Polish families. The Ukrainian people that lived over there, they didn't like the idea so much, because that land used to be part of Ukraine before the First World War.

I see.

So they were very resentful to Polish families. I remember one time when we had an open house when we moved in there. And my father invited all the neighbors. And there were Ukrainian people too. And after eating and drinking, some of the guys got drunk. And they were very nasty to us.

The neighbor, next door neighbor, ran to his house and picked up an ax. And he came with an ax to our family and argued with another guy. And he grabbed-- he was so mad at them-- he grabbed his hat, put it on the ground, start chopping it with his ax.

So my mother got so scared. She took us little kids and shoved us in the other bedroom and closed the door so we wouldn't be afraid of it.

Did anything happen?

I don't know what happened afterwards. But they were fighting all the time with us.

This were Ukrainians that you had invited to your home as an open house. And they got in a fight with one of your other neighbors?

Mm-hmm. Yes.

Wow.

But after heavy drinking, of course.

Of course. Of course, not regular kind of day.

Yeah, well, whatever they felt, they didn't show it normally. But after you have so much to drink, things come out. Yeah.

And so when you're taken to the train, you saw a dozen-- on the way, you saw a dozen other sleds or sleighs as well?

There was a whole line of sleds going towards the train station. And at the train station, when we got there, there was a whole string of boxcars parked on the railroad tracks. And they told us to dismount. And not only us but all these other people too, they were on the sleds. And they start pushing us into the boxcars.

Some people resent it. They pushed them like cattles. They loaded them up in the boxcars. There was no way to resent it. All you had to do was obey, because there were soldiers with the weapons over there, the fixed bayonets. And they couldn't stand up to them.

Did anybody get shot because they disobeyed?

No, nobody got shot. But a few people got hit in the head with their weapons.

Mm-hmm. And describe to me what the sled-- you say it was a sled or a sleigh? Describe to me this vehicle. I don't understand. What did it look like? Clearly, it had runners rather than wheels, because it was--

There was no wheels.

No wheels.

No wheel.

But how was it shaped?

It was the size of a car, maybe, a little bigger. And they had seats, front and the back, like in the boat. Sometimes, we have seats at the front, the back.

Oh, yeah, yeah. OK.

And of course, there was a front seat for the driver taking care of the horses.

How many people would fit on one of these sleds?

Well, we loaded pretty much. Our family loaded up the sled pretty good.

OK, so it would--

I don't think they could fit anymore in there.

So it was nine people from your family? Or eight people?

Eight, but--

Eight.

--brother Ted was not there.

Right, eight people from your family plus whatever items you took with you.

Yes.

OK. Was it covered? Or was it open?

It was open.

It was open.

Yes.

So it was cold?

Very cold, yes.

OK. So now, where were the box cars? Was this at a local train station?

Yes, the boxcars were at the local train station. And it looks like the doors were open. They were waiting for us to come in.

And where was-- Liczkowce, did I say it right?

Liczkowce was the name of the place.

Liczkowce, right?

Yes.

Liczkowce, it had a train station at that village? Or was it you had to go somewhere--

It was not at the village. It was farther away from the village, closer to the Russian border. I think that the boxcars might have been on the Russian side already, at the--

Really?

--Russian border, because we were very close to the border, Russian border.

I see. OK. But was the railway station where you went, was it part of a town? Or was it out in an open field where these--

It was not a station. It was just railroad tracks and nothing else in there.

Oh.

Just the boxcars were sitting on the railroad tracks. But there was no station, no buildings, nothing there.

So nobody could have seen you. Nobody from--

No.

--neighbors who weren't taken could have seen all this.

There's nobody inside to help you or see it.

I see. I see.

The railroad track must have been going close to our village going somewhere else. But they stopped over there to load these people into the boxcars.

And was it a long line of boxcars?

Oh. Yeah. I was a small boy. But it seemed like a lot. I'd say maybe-- I don't know-- up to 15 or 20 boxcars.

Mm-hmm. And what did they look like from the inside? When you got in, what did they look like?

The inside was empty boxcars with the shelves. On each side of the boxcar, they had double layer of the shelves where people were sitting, laying later on.

You had the floor?

There was a floor. In the middle of the floor, there was a stove, a wood-fired stove. And there was a hole in the corner, in the floor, in the corner of the boxcar where we use it for a toilet. And on the shelves, that's where they packed all the people on the shelves. On one side, double layer deck, double layer of shelves. And on the other side, double layer deck, so people were down below and above. And some of them were standing in the standing position like that.

Oh, really?

Yeah.

So some of them didn't have a place to go--

No.

--on the shelves?

There was no place for everybody. Just some of them were standing. They packed us like sardines into the boxcar.

And what about your things? Where did those go? Your dead chickens with the--

Well, Father took it on his back with the bag. And we took it in. And that's a good thing we took it in, because we would have died from hunger during the trip if we didn't have that. A lot of people didn't have anything to eat or drink. And they died in the boxcars. And they knew, as the train came to the next station, they tossed them out.

We'll come to this. We'll come to this. I want to talk--

Yeah, that's a bad--

--about it in more detail. So I want to get a sense of-- so you have the ground floor. You have then a platform on either side of the middle--

Double.

--and then another platform.

Yes.

So was anybody on the ground floor? Or did they only start laying down or sitting up in the first platform?

Well, people were on the floor. The people were on the first platform and on the second platform. And then they had little windows up on top, very small windows. So it was all frozen, of course, in the wintertime. We couldn't see much. But there was a window there.

Which platform did you go into?

We were on the second. Us kids, the younger kids-- me, my sister Bernice, Bronia, and Stanley, they put us on the second shelf, up high.

So the top one?

Of the top one.

The top one. OK.

And my parents and my sister and other brothers, they were on the main floor.

They were on the middle one or on the floor itself?

On the floor next to the shelves.

OK. So there's the middle plank. They didn't get into that. And then there's the top plank. And you're on top of that.

We're on top of that, very top.

And were you on the left side or the right side? Do you remember?

Let me see. I was on the right side--

On the right side.

--right next to the window.

So could you see--

I remember that, because I was licking that ice. When I needed a drink, there was no water. So I was licking that ice to get some moisture.

It was that cold?

Yeah.

It was that cold.

But they did have a stove in the middle of the boxcar to heat it up a little bit, because it was very cold out there. And every station we came to, they would open the door and give us some burning wood and maybe some slice of bread for some people. Some people got bread. We didn't get anything, because I don't know why.

But it so happens that, in our boxcar, before the train started, some guy, smart guy-- he thought he was smart-- he put his kid in the sack, potato sack, and tried to lower him from the boxcar so the kid could escape. The Russian soldiers saw that. They caught him. They caught the kid, put them back in the boxcar. And they closed the door and put a red X on our boxcar so the boxcar would not be opened at any station that we traveled all the way.

Other people were getting food, little food, and burning wood. And our boxcar would get nothing, because we were punished for that.

Wow.

So a lot of people died from hunger and thirst, because the boxcar was not opened for a couple of weeks there on the way to Siberia.

Wow.

A lot of people died.

Wow.

Yeah.

Wow. Did that child survive, the one that was in the sack?

I have no idea.

You don't remember. You don't remember.

We didn't worry about anybody else. We worried about our immediate family.

Right. Right. Wow. And so when the train would stop, and wood would be given to others, you didn't get any?

No. We had two Russian soldiers guarding the boxcar, walking up and down with the fixed bayonets so nobody pull any fast ones anymore, I guess. So we didn't get anything, no.

And the door was never opened?

The door was never opened until we got to the destination, to Siberia.

Do you remember when you crossed the border into the Soviet Union?

When they loaded us on the boxcars, I think we were on the Russian border already. We were in Russia already.

So you never-- some people talked about they knew they were at the border because the wheels of the trains--

Yes.

--had to be changed.

It was they have larger tracks than Poland in the west.

Right.

So the Russian trains could not go into Poland, or Polish trains could go into Russia, because Russian tracks were wider.

OK. And so you never had to change tracks?

Never had--

You never had to change the tracks?

No, we never changed. So we must have been on the Russian trucks, because we went all the way through.

OK. Did you know any of the people who were in the boxcar with you?

No, nobody.

So they weren't the same families from the same settlement or anything like that in your boxcar?

Well, I don't know if these people in our boxcar were from our neighbors or not, because after they unloaded a lot of people from the sled's, people got mixed up here and there. And so they is shoving people into the boxcars. I don't know if they were somebody that we knew or not.

Got it. And at any point up to that point, did anybody tell you why you were being taken away?

Nobody knew where we going. And even nobody ask you. You couldn't ask anybody, because everybody was in the same boat. They didn't know what was going on.

And were the soldiers-- were they yelling? How did they behave, these soldiers?

Well, they weren't yelling. But they're giving us direct orders to get in the boxcars. If somebody didn't move, they were pushing them, things like that. A couple of guys got hit with the carbines. But they weren't very cruel, no.

Were they mostly younger soldiers?

I'm sorry?

Were they mostly younger soldiers, the ones that with the bayonets? Or were they--

Yeah, I would say they were the middle-aged soldiers. They were not young, the middle-aged soldiers.

They were middle-aged soldiers?

Yes.

OK. OK.

I guess they call them at that time the Bolsheviks.

Mm-hmm. Yeah. Well, that was the system. On the way there, tell me, if your boxcar had an x on it--

Yes?

--what are some of the things that happened inside the box car as you were traveling?

Whoa, it was very sorry sight. People were hungry. People were thirsty. There was no food. There was no water.

We were lucky, because I was next to the window. I could lick some ice from the window. And my father had some chickens in the bag, so we had to turn around, quietly undo it, and put some of the chicken-- of course, he was hiding it from the other people-- put it on the stove. So we had half raw, half--

Half-cooked, yeah.

--heated, half-cooked. We had some meat to eat. But other people, they didn't have anything. They were just dying from thirst and from hunger.

Who died? Can you remember anybody?

I didn't know anybody in the boxcar except my family.

Well, I mean, was it children? Was it old people? Do you remember anybody specifically?

They were mixed. There were women. There were children and the men. And whoever died, they just-- when they pulled up, people were banging on the door at the station. When we stopped, they wouldn't open. But sometimes, they would open to get the dead out. I guess the women, the men, were screaming that we have dead people. So they would open the door to toss those bodies out, out in the snow. And the trains keep moving. And they locked the doors again.

And that happened how many times?

Ooh, I don't know. But that was for a couple of weeks until we got to Siberia.

So that's the only time the door would open is to get the bodies out?

That's right. That's right. Well, they probably loaded some burning wood at the same time, because they had to heat up the boxcar a little bit. But I don't remember that.

So no hot water, no water at all, was given?

Nothing.

Nothing.

Some of those boxcars, they are made out of metal. So they are frozen. So people scraping the ice from the metal boxcars or from the windows, licking the ice and snow. Some made it. Some didn't.

About how many people, do you think, from your boxcar got thrown away, got thrown out?

It's hard to tell. I don't know, maybe over 50 or more.

Really?

Yeah, it was just like this. Everybody is standing. I don't know how those people could stand that much long. Like I said, in the corner of the boxcar, there's was big hole in the floor. So the kids want to go to the washroom-- or even grownups-- some of the people put blankets, something to cover up. And the kids go. And they did it right into the hole.

I know it's very unfair to ask somebody who was six years old at the time-- and it's now decades later-- about how many

people there might have been in that boxcar. But can you give an estimate? Would it have been more than 50 people? More than 80 people or something like that? Do you have any idea?

No. It's pretty hard. I don't know if I can give you exact figure but--

Of course, not exact.

--it was packed. That boxcar was packed.

OK. And some of the people who were standing, they died standing?

Yeah, some people died. They stand up. And some of them fell down. Somebody, they moved it to the side somewhere or under the shelves, under the benches there or-- what-- the bleachers, whatever they call them.

The platforms.

The platforms.

Those platforms.

Yeah.

Yeah. So a body would be pushed underneath the platform. Did people talk to one another in the boxcar?

There wasn't much talking. It was a lot of crying and praying and crying. And kids are crying. Women are crying. It was a chaos. It was a big chaos.

What did you see through the windows? You--

You couldn't see anything. It was frozen.

Oh. If it wasn't frozen, would you have been able to look through it? Or was it like a wooden something--

No, it was the glass.

--covered over the windows?

I think it was glass in the glass window, maybe 6 by 8 or something, very small. But it was all frozen solid. You couldn't see anything.

OK. And what about the light itself within the box car? Was it dark in there?

There was no light. It was dark all the time.

Even in the daytime?

Except the light we had through the window a little bit, through that one window. I saw at the train station, they had different boxcars. They had bigger openings, larger windows, where some people would stick their heads out before we even took off. But our boxcar was different. It only had one little window in there and nothing else.

OK. And you traveled for how long again?

I don't know exactly. But from what I've heard, it was like over two weeks, over two weeks. The train was very slow, going very slowly and stopping at every station on the way to Siberia. And when they stop at the train station, they

would stay there for hours sometimes, changing back and forth--

The tracks? Changing--

Changing the tracks to get more wagons attached or disconnecting-- I don't know what they did. But we could hear boom, boom, bouncing all the time. And then sometimes, three or four hours waiting at the station and start moving again.

Where did you finally end up? When they finally opened the door and let you out, what did you see?

Oh, when they opened the door, it was like today outside, the snow, lots of snow and cold weather, forest, nothing in sight. And far away, they could see some barracks over there. I don't know how many but maybe a dozen or more barracks.

And they told us to get off from the boxcars and start walking, and the soldiers on both sides of us with the carbines. And they walk us. They walked us to the barracks.

So there was no cart, no sled, no--

Nothing.

Nothing. Everybody had to walk?

Everybody had to walk.

And were you able to carry your items with you, that is, whatever goods you had taken from home? Was--

There was nothing left already, just the clothes that we had on. There was nothing else.

So had you eaten the chickens?

Yes, we ate the chickens.

OK. Are there moments that you remember you were hungry in the boxcar?

I'm sorry?

Were you hungry in the boxcar?

Oh, yes. Well, Father had those chickens. It was hardly enough to satisfy your thirst, your hunger, all this time. So sure, I was hungry. I was thirsty. I was hungry.

Little kids ask their mothers for food. The mothers cry. They couldn't give them anything. Some of the little ones, babies, the mother breastfed them. But I'd say that's the way it was.

All right. So you're walking from the railroad tracks to this settlement in the distance?

Yeah.

About how long did it take?

I don't know. Maybe it would take you about half an hour, not even that.

OK. So it was reasonably close by?

Yes, it wasn't that far. You could see the barracks from the train station.

OK. And do you remember the name of this place?

They had a long name, a Russian name. I don't remember. But that was in Novosibirsk area.

In the Novosibirsk area?

Novosibirsk area, yes.

OK. And when you got to the barracks, what did you see? What happened then?

Well, they divided people to each barrack. I don't know, maybe 20 people to the barracks or something. And you walk in the barracks. And they had bunks, wooden bunks, like they have sometimes in the army camps or something. And they're stacked up like two or three bunks, one on top of the other.

So it was like a bottom bunk, a middle bunk, and--

Yes.

--a top bunk?

Uh-huh. And there was no mattresses over there. They used sawdust for mattresses. And so everybody got one bunk.

Not sawdust in some material, but just the sawdust as--

Just it was--

--it is on the floor.

--laying loose. It was not covered in anything, loose. And so after we got to the barracks, and everybody was assigned a bunk, they issued us some warm clothes. They called it kufajka, jackets, heavy winter jackets-- they call it kufajka in Russians-- and valenki, the shoes with the woolen liner, because the temperature over there was like 40 below zero. So--

What did these clothes look like, tell me, the valenki and the shoes? How did they look?

Well, the liner was like shoe in the shoe. But the liner was made out of wool, about a half inch thick.

Oh.

So you couldn't freeze your feet in that kind of cold weather. And then you put that into another shoe.

OK. So it was like you had a liner on your foot. You had a shoe on your foot. Then you put a liner on it. And then you put that into another--

No, you put the liner on your bare foot.

On your bare foot?

And then with the liner, you put it in another shoe.

And you were issued both the liners and the shoes?

Yes, and the other jackets.

And the jackets, OK. And were you fed at any point?

I what?

Were you fed at any point?

Oh, no, no, no. There was no food in there. There was no food in there.

So when was your next meal? When did you have your next meal?

There was no meal. The barracks were guarded by the Russian soldiers. They took all the men and women that were strong enough or healthy enough to cut the trees in the forest. Every day for eight hours, 10 hours a day, they had to cut the tree with handmade saws. And I guess from those trees, they're making telephone poles or something. They're loading all the trucks and sending it all by the railroad cars.

But those that didn't work-- those that work could get a slice of bread and a cup of hot water a day. And those that didn't work didn't get anything at all, because the Russians said [SPEAKING RUSSIAN]. Means that if you don't work, you don't eat.

So many times, when my father and my older sister Marysia, they're going to work early in the morning, they got the slice of bread and the cup of hot water. And we kids wake up and look at him. He wouldn't eat it. With the tears in his eyes, he would divide that little piece of bread.

Your father?

He would divide the bread among the kids. And he went to work without any food. And so that's what we ate. Later on, during the day, the Russian soldiers would allow us to go outside, those that didn't work, women and kids. And then Mother would take us to the nearby forest. And we would take some sap from the birch trees, cut the-- catch it. It was like a syrup. We had the syrup from the trees and some bark. They cut off some bark. And women brought it home and boil it with hot water, made the soup out of it.

And that was in the wintertime?

That was in the wintertime. So you--

In the summertime, it was just the opposite. We get to the forest. And we pick the berries.

But when you first--

Mushrooms or berries in the summertime.

When you first arrived, and you were given these bunks-- you were assigned bunks-- was it then said somebody-- of your family, only two people worked. And the rest, so six people, didn't work. Your mom stayed home with the rest of the kids.

Right.

And there was no way for even to get a first meal there?

Well, the sister Janina and brother Joe and Stanley, which were older than me and my sister Bernice, they were attending a Russian school. They had a small school in the camp over there. So they were taking all these kids at that age and were teaching them to read and write in Russian. But me and Bernice were staying with Mom in the barracks all

the time.

OK. And how did your mother eat? I mean, how did you guys get food when your father and your sister, your oldest sister, were out cutting the forest?

Well, in addition to what we got from the forest, sometimes-- there was a Russian village on the other side of the forest-- Mother would walk us up there. And she was begging from the Russian families, begging for a little potatoes or something. In addition to that, sometimes you'd find a dead horse laying somewhere by the woods. So they would take her up to that horse and bring it home and boil it or something like that.

You eat all kinds of garbage, whatever you could find. People were hungry, dying from hunger and from sicknesses, from hunger, from overwork. Some people, they were overworked. They had no strength to go on. They're just dropping dead. And nobody cared. They just take the dead bodies. They toss them outside in the snow and keep going.

I remember that, as a kid, we used to play with the other kids, go outside, jump on the dead bodies from one corpse to the next. That was our game. But we didn't think anything of it at that time, because that was like daily occurrence. So it's very sad to think about it now. But that's the way it was.

Did you see your father and your older sister? Did they come back every night from the forest?

I didn't see them every night. But many times that I saw them, they were tired. They were beat. They were cold, hungry. Everything, it all was bad. They lived through it.

And they had a norm. To cut the woods in the forest, everybody had to cut so many trees, like a norm, like 20 or 10, 15 trees. They had to be cut. If they didn't meet the norm, they wouldn't get the slice of bread, the cup of water. So they had to perform and cut enough trees every day with the handsaws, no power saws, to cut those trees so they would get a slice of bread and a cup of hot water.

Were there times that they didn't meet the norm?

There was, yes. There was. They came with the tears in their eyes. Not only that they didn't eat anything, but they couldn't give us anything either. I don't know what they ate. They must have ate something with the work in the forest, maybe find some rabbits or-- I don't know. I don't know what they ate. But he lost a lot of weight. He looked like a living dead.

Hmm. How long did the cold last? When you arrived there, it must have been like late February, early March. How long was the cold weather around for?

Exactly. I have no idea. But it must have been a couple more months after we got there.

OK. Like March and April into May. OK.

During the springtime, it was much better, because we could go pick some-- get something from the woods, find something to eat there or maybe going out to the villages more often to beg for some food. The Russian people were good to us. Some of them were family people. And they had small kids, so they felt sorry for us. So my mother goes up there with a bunch of kids. And with the tears in their eyes, they felt sorry for us.

Did she ever trade anything? Did she have anything to trade for food?

No, we had nothing.

Oh, my.

We had nothing.

Oh, my. And the blankets that she had taken, the pillows that she had taken, were they all gone by then?

I don't know what she did with it. She must have had them in the barracks, maybe. But we didn't do any trading, no.

OK. Did you have any interaction with any of the guards or the soldiers? Did they come in and, in some way, rule your lives?

No, the Kommandant was on the white horse going around from one barrack to the next, checking up on these soldiers. And the soldiers made some remarks.

My mother was praying one time. I remember my mother was praying in the barracks, so the soldiers came in and grabbed her by the neck and says, what are you doing? She said, I'm praying to my God. He says, there's no God. You pray to [RUSSIAN] Stalin. He's our God. He give you what you want.

And so they discouraged us from praying. And all the women in the barracks, they're pray. They had to pray at night quietly when there's nobody to see them. It was forbidden to pray.

Who is [RUSSIAN] Stalin? What does [RUSSIAN] mean?

[RUSSIAN], "father" in Russian. They call him Father Stalin. Yeah.

OK. And that leads me to another question. What were the relations like between families in the barracks? Did they support one another? Did they talk to one another? Or were they frightened of one another?

Well, yeah, they were very close together, because they were all in the same boat and same misery. So one was helping the other. But at night, you heard nothing but cries of the babies and people screaming because they had lice and all the bugs in the sawdust that was biting people. And so you couldn't even sleep all night.

Really? Yeah?

It was very hard to sleep in that dust.

You were woken up often?

Oh, yes, very often, scared many times. When I heard the screams of the children, it wakes you up. You don't know what's going on. It's dark in there. Nothing, you don't know what's going on.

Were people dying in the barracks?

Many. Many died. In fact, we were the only family that kids survive, all of us. And the rest of the kids there all died.

Wow.

So I don't know-- the grace of God or whatever-- but my mother says it must have been because she prayed so hard. But we're the only one family that all the kids survive. And the rest of the family that have kids, smaller and older, they all died.

That is, all of the children died? Or somebody from each family died?

All the children in each--

All the--

--families. All families that had children, all those children died over there in-- not the same night, no-- in different nights. One night, died so many. The next night, died so many.

Oh, my goodness.

Yeah it was terrible.

Oh, my goodness. And what happened with the bodies? What did people do with the bodies?

Tossed them outside in the snow. The wolves come in at night. They eat them up. Terrible. Yeah.

So the playmates that you had died.

The what?

The playmates. You said you would play outside with some of the children. And some of these--

That was before they started dying out. When they started tossing out-- some of the bodies were not all children. They're grownups too.

Right. Right.

So slowly but surely, those kids that I played with are dying out. And we're left all alone, as far as a big family.

And then let's talk about the summertime. The summertime of 1940 comes. And was your father and your sister still working in the forest cutting logs--

Yes.

--during the summer?

Yes.

OK. Tell me, as much as you can, what kind of food were you able to gather in the forest?

In the forest, we pick some berries, mushrooms, and other green leaves, stuff. But my mother knew what it is. She would make soup out of it, some white bark from the birch trees. And they put it in the water, boil it, make some kind of a soup out of it. And like I said, we used to go to the Russian villages and beg for potatoes and some food, something.

Were you near a river at all or not? Were you near a river?

There was no river. No.

There was no river.

Just the forest.

Just the forest.

Yeah.

OK. And how did that first summer progress? Were you able to get any food to be able to prepare for the winter at all, the next winter?

No. No, you could not gather any food or prepare it for the next winter, no.

So they couldn't-- not enough of potatoes or potato eyes to be able to plant them--

It was just enough to cook in one day and eat it. Yeah.

OK. So what happened the following fall and into the second winter? How did things go then?

Well, it looked pretty much the same as we had the first one. People were dying. Some people are working. Those that were healthy, they're working cutting the trees in the forest. And the young ones will stay with their mother, those who were alive. And slowly, everybody was dying out. There's not too many of us left by the next winter.

Did the barracks become emptier and emptier?

Emptier and emptier all the time. Exactly.

Were there any new transports that were brought in?

No. There was no new transport coming in. From what I heard, there are many transport. But they're going to different places, to different locations. But to our place, they had no replacement at all.

And do you have an idea of how large your area was to begin with when you first arrived? Was it like 800 people or 500 people? Or how large a group got placed in this?

It couldn't be more than 100 or 150 or so.

So small, actually.

Yeah, a small group.

Small group.

Yeah.

And the Kommandant, I mean, if you had a Kommandant and soldiers, they must have had food.

Yeah. They had food. But they wouldn't give us any food. For Polish people, didn't get any food. Only the Russian soldiers, Kommandant, they must have had good food, yeah. But we were out there not to eat good food. We were out there to do the work and perish. That's why they took us out there to begin with.

So the next winter, there are far fewer people. Many, many more had died out. Your father and your sister, somehow or other, still were surviving. And they continued to work in the forest.

Yes.

Was life any different the second winter than it was the first?

People got used to living like that already. And there was no use to complain or cry, because it didn't help any. So everybody accepted the situation that was at hand. And I don't know exactly what time, but there was-- in 1942, when Russia made an ally with the United States to fight against Hitler, the Polish General Anders and Sikorski, had a deal with Stalin to create Polish army from those prisoners in Siberia for Polish people.

And so they agreed. And they gave us amnesty. All these people that were in the Gulag over there in the work camps could go free.

Was this in 1942 that you found out about it or in 1941?

It could have been '41. I'm not sure exactly what year it was. I think it was 1941. I think it was, yeah, because if '42-- in 1941, yeah, second half of 1941, I think it was.

Do you remember how you learned about this?

Well, somebody found out from Kommandant or somebody that you have amnesty, because Polish army is being formed. And those people that live in the barracks had amnesty. They could walk free if they wanted to.

OK. We'll come to that in a minute. Until that amnesty, I want to get a sense, more, of how life-- until you found out about it.

Mm, OK.

How did life continue? So the second winter, which is the winter of 1941--

'41.

--your father and your sister continued to work in the forest.

Mm-hmm.

I'll go back even a little bit more. Do you remember Christmas of 1940? Was there any kind of commemoration that Christmas has come and Christmas passed? Or not at all?

Nobody even mentioned the word of Christmas. The people were so busy trying to keep warm and get something to eat. Nobody bothered about talking about Christmas. People were praying quietly at home in the barracks at night. So I don't remember any--

Anything.

--anything about Christmas, decorations, or even the carols, songs, or anything, nothing.

OK. OK. And so throughout the winter of 1940, things are the same as they had been before?

Yes.

OK. And the spring comes again. And did anything else change? I mean, were there any other things? Your siblings were going to school. Did they talk about what they were learning in school?

They were learning how to read and write in Russian. And they brainwashed them about there is no God, that Stalin is their God, things like that. My brother Stanley told me that when they came back from the school to our mother, she slapped him a couple of times. She says, don't talk like that. There is God. Stalin is not your God.

But in return, they were getting some food over there in school, maybe some drinks. I don't know what, but.

They got something.

They were forced to go to school, not by choice. They were forced.

But you were too young.

I was too young. I couldn't go-- my sister, Bernice, too.

OK. Did you have fears? Do you remember if you had fears during this time? Like, children have fears. They fear the night. Or they fear the dark. Or they fear a ghost or something like that. Do you remember anything like that?

Well, of course. I was very scared too. Many times because when you hear your mother cry and other kids cry at night, and you hear the soldiers marching or talking outside the barracks, it's dark. You don't know what's going to happen to you. And you're hungry and cold. Sure, you're scared, very scared. But what can you do?

Did you notice whether-- did your mother's personality change at all or your father's personality during this time?

Most of the time, they even couldn't find the right words to talk to each other. They'd just look at each other and hug each other with the tears in their eyes. They're always worried. How can they save the children? Looks like my father didn't care too much about his own life. But he tried to comfort my mother, because she was always crying and praying save the children.

OK.

All right, we're rolling again.

OK. Before the break, we were talking about many of the events of being deported, that is, the first part of all of this, when you were taken from your home to the boxcars. And then it took so many weeks to get to Siberia.

And during the break, you mentioned to me there was something you had forgotten about an experience in the boxcar that involved your youngest sister. Can you tell me what that is now?

Yes. Sure. Now, we're in the boxcars. The train was moving. And I guess, at that time, the train came through a stop. And Bernice was on the upper deck, on the shelf, whatever it was--

Mm-hmm. The platform you were telling me about.

Platform, yeah. And she wanted to go to the washroom. So my older sister Jenny took her. And I handed her over to my mother. And somehow, when the train started, it jerked. And Bernice fell off.

She fell off from Jenny's arms. And she fell on the edge of the-- something-- there was some kind of object on the floor. And she hit her forehead. And she had a nasty cut on her upper nose.

So this is while the boxcar is locked. And you've stopped at some place. And then--

Yes.

--suddenly, it started going.

Exactly, right.

So what happened?

Well, she was bleeding very bad. My mother didn't know what to do. She had to take some clothing or whatever she had. She put it over her face to cover it up. But there was no immediate help and no medicine. There's not much we could do. We just pressed hard against it with some cloth.

And how long did this last? What happened to your sister?

She had open wounds until we got to Siberia. And up to today, she's got a big scar over here, between the eyes.

So it was in the end she survived it. But it was an accident that could have happened. And what made it unusual was that there was no way to treat it, no place to ask for help, nobody to--

Nobody to help.

--help.

Yeah, except press some clothes or whatever it was-- paper or clothes-- against the wound so she would stop the bleeding a little bit.

And did this bleed for a long time, do you know? Was it a deep enough gash that--

Oh, she was crying for quite a while. But eventually, she realized there's not much anybody can do for us. So--

She probably--

--that was the end of it. And my sister, Jenny, was watching her all the time. And she tried to comfort her every time she start bleeding again. So she put some clothes to wipe her off or something, things like that.

Yeah. Yeah. Did such accidents happen to other people, other children, in the boxcar?

Not that I know of. I don't remember. I didn't see it, because you don't observe everybody.

Of course. Of course. Of course. But it must have been frightening for everybody, for your mother, for your--

Oh, yeah--

--sister.

--Mother was, oh, she was in tears. She thought that she was going to die over there, because nobody could help her with the wounds, open wounds. It was a nasty cut all the way between the eyes over here.

Something that might have needed stitches

Oh, yes. But she never had any stitches. And she's got a big scar over there now.

OK. OK. Let's turn again to when you're in the camp. And you say that, at some point in 1941, there was an agreement by General Anders with the Soviets about fighting the Germans.

Yes. General Anders made the agreement with Stalin and the Soviets to form Polish army in Siberia to help Russians and Allies-- because Russia was an ally with the United States and England at that time-- to fight together against Hitler. And in exchange, Stalin, or Russia, offered amnesty for all these people that was in Siberia over there.

People like you.

People like me, like us. I don't know if all of the people that were in Siberia-- because what I heard was supposed to be over a million and a half people taken to Siberia. But I don't know if all of them got amnesty. But as far as I know, the people in our camp and in surrounding areas, they're all leaving the camp on their own.

So how did this news trickle down to you if there was no means of information? How did you find out that there was this amnesty?

I think the Kommandant was going on the horse and making an announcement to the people that you're free. You can

go.

Do you remember about when this was, whether it was summer or fall, or what time of year it might have--

It was the end of summer. Yeah, it was the end of summer.

So that would have been the summer of '41.

Yeah.

And you will have been in the camp for a year and a half?

Yeah, exactly. I think it was a year and a half, yeah. It wasn't exactly two winters. I think it was maybe 1 and 1/2, something like that.

Anyways, when they announced that we're free, people start-- those that couldn't walk, they're helped and on the crutches. And people were sick. Some couldn't walk. Their shaggy clothes and the fleas all over their hair and everything, everything, it's a terrible sight. But everybody want to go with their freedom.

So did they all leave the camp?

They could leave the camp.

And did they all leave the camp?

I don't know. We traveled with three families all together. Hand-by-hand, everybody is by hand, walking together. And we got to the train station. There was not a station. It was the track, actually, where they brought us in.

The same place where you had been when the rail doors opened from the cattle cars? At that spot, is that where you're saying?

We went to the same spot where they unloaded us to the camp. And when the trains were hauling the logs to the nearest towns, we were catching those freight trains and moving from one town to the next going south. My mother and other women, they knew they had to go south because it was much warmer down south.

And that's how we got all the way to Uzbekistan.

All eight of you?

All eight of us. Yeah, all eight of us.

How long did it take?

It took us about three months.

Wow.

Yeah, we had to hide. During the daylight, we had to get off the boxcar so they wouldn't catch us. And we had to hide.

One time, we hid in the cemetery. And we had no food, so. Uzbekis over there, they have a strange tradition. When they bury people, they wrap them up in the white sheets, sit them in the sitting position. And they bring food to them at night or in the evenings. They think that the soul is hungry, going to eat that. That's what I was told.

So when we hid in the cemetery, we were digging up those graves and get the food out from there.

Oh, my goodness.

Help ourselves, because we were so hungry, no clothes, no food, nothing. And the rest of it, the wolves came in at night and dug up all the food over there. They could smell pretty good.

Wow.

Yeah.

Would you hide because you didn't have the money to pay the train fare? Is this it?

Not only the money. We were enemies to those people over there. They didn't know that we had amnesty.

Didn't you get a piece of paper or something?

Nothing. Nothing. They just opened the gates, says, get out. Go if you want to. So those people that we met, it was Uzbekistan. And the Russian people on the way, they still knew that we were Polish refugees. And they were hostile to us. They thought that we were their enemy.

OK. OK. So nobody helped you, in other words?

Nobody. Nobody. We did what we had to do. We steal it. We stole things, the food, travelled at night like hobos, jump on the freight trains here and there, until we got to Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

When we got to Tashkent, my father and my sister Mary and my sister Jenny were so sick with typhoid, they took them off. Somebody recommended that we go leave them in the hospital over there.

So my mother left them in the hospital. The rest of us kids traveled on foot for about-- I don't know-- maybe 10 or 15 kilometers, my mother said. And we found an abandoned hut in Uzbekistan over there with no roof. It looked like that was place for the cattle or camels or whatever they had over there with a lot of hay on the ground. So we parked over there.

And for food, oh, women went out there. And they found some dead horses in the ditches. They cut up the meat and scraped off all the garbage, maggots, from this and start boiling it. And we had to live, had to eat something.

And that's what you ate.

Also, my mother and other women used to go in the steppes, catch the turtles, get the turtles, and tie them up on the rope, and bring them into the hut. And when the Uzbeki people saw us do that, they were spitting on us, because that's against their religion to eat the--

Eat the turtle?

--turtles' meat. Yeah.

But anyways, when they brought those turtles, we put them in a big bucket of boiling water, just dumped them in there. And when the turtles died, then we took them and crack them open on the rock. And they had some good meat, good eggs and good meat over there. So we had some good food already.

So how big were these turtles? Were they like this small? Were they--

Oh, no, no. They were ground turtles. They're not water turtles.

So show me how big they would be.

Oh. Maybe like this.

That looks like about eight inches in diameter or something like that.

Eight by six, something like that. Yeah. So we had some good food. We had the warm weather already.

And what was happening with your father and your two sisters?

My father and two sisters were in a Tashkent hospital. And after a couple of weeks, my mother went on foot to the hospital.

15 kilometers?

10 or 15, something like that, yeah. She had a rosary in her hand. And she would be doing the beads and walking along. And she went up there. And she started asking for her [NON-ENGLISH], for her husband. And they told us that, yeah, there was a [NON-ENGLISH], a Jew, by that name, Migut, with the long beard and everything.

My father couldn't shave. He had black hair so he looked like a man with the long beard. And they thought he was Jewish.

So he says, yeah, but he died. We tossed him outside. I guess they were against the Jews too. So when they found out somebody was Jewish or Polish, when they died, they just tossed them out there for the hyenas to eat him at night.

So my mother was crying. And then she went asking for my sisters. And they showed her where my sister Mary was. This, I don't know this. I didn't see it. But my mother was telling me this.

She says she went up there. She saw Mary was very thin, like half of her left from hunger or whatever. And she says, Mom, give me some food. I'm dying from hunger. So she went to the people over in the hospital and tried to beg some food for her.

And they said that they don't know who she is, that they can't help her.

In other words, she was in a--

And that was the last time she saw her.

Really?

So Mary, she never saw Mary again?

Never again. She died in the hospital. Then the next time, second time she went, she didn't know where she died, when she died, where she was. She was never-- they never buried people over there if they were not Russian or Uzbekis. They never buried them. They just tossed them outside.

But sister Jenny was still alive. And my mother saw her in the hospital too. And my sister Jenny was telling my mother that when she was in the hospital, the nurses were very cruel to her. They put nails under her fingernails and ask her to denounce God.

Oh, my goodness.

And they ask her to pray to Stalin. She wouldn't do it. So they just would try to starve her and give her all kinds of torture. So my sister Jenny was telling to my mother. My mother told us that.

And so my mother, after the visit, she went back to us to the hut in Uzbekis. And about a week later, she went to the hospital again to visit Jenny this time. And as she was walking-- there was no transportation-- some guy, Uzbeki guys, they had arbas, they call it, like the two wheels, like a wagon pulled by a donkey or a horse or something.

So as my mother walked doing her rosary, the arba pulled by. And Jenny says, Mom. Jenny said the Uzbeki guy gave my sister Jenny a ride from the hospital somehow. I don't know how she got out. But they let her out. So she got out.

And my mother looked at her. She couldn't believe it. She says, oh, my God, what an incident. She said, I was going up to see you and you on the-- So they started hugging and kissing and crying.

And both of them came back to the hut. So then Jenny was good. My mother and my brother Joe catch all those turtles all the time so we could have something to eat.

So how long did you stay in this place?

In Uzbeki, we had about three, four, maybe six months.

A long time.

Yeah. Well, anyways, what we did, the Uzbeki woman that lived next to that empty hut where we stayed, she had like a big property, the fence and the cows. So she felt sorry for us. She brought us some milk and some food. And she even hired my brother Stanley and Joe to care for her cows every day. And for that, she was giving them a little slice of bread-- not bread. They call it pirozhki, like pizza bread.

Oh, yeah, flatbread.

What?

Flatbread.

Yes, that's what it is. So they had a job already attending to her cows. And me and Bernice, she recommended that my mother takes us to the orphanage to the-- not orphanage, kindergarten, Uzbeki kindergarten. So Bernice and I were going to the kindergarten every day. And Stanley and Joe were taking care of the cows for the Uzbeki woman they call [NON-ENGLISH], Uzbeki, they called her.

Stanley got sick one time. He got bit by scorpion.

Oh, wow.

Because there was a lot of scorpions over at that time. So he was burning with fever. But that Uzbeki woman was very good to us. And she was bringing him all kinds of-- I don't know whether it was medicine or some kind of voodoo things or whatever. Anyway, she was helping him when he was burning with fever. She got him well. So we were very thankful for what she did to us.

And we were in the orphanage. Me and Bernice were in the orphanage over there every day, except the weekends, I guess. And in the orphanage, they had a whole bunch of Uzbeki children. We were the only two Polish people.

So do you have memories of the orphanage?

Oh, yes, very much so.

Tell me about them.

The teacher would take us in the public square up there. And she was singing in Uzbeki. [SINGING IN UZBEK]

That's Uzbeki.

And what did it mean?

I don't know what it means.

[LAUGHTER]

She taught us how to sing that.

Children picking up--

Anyway, she had a son, maybe four or five years old kid. He was a little chubby guy. And he had a darker complexion, like he was maybe from the southern Uzbeki or somewhere. But he liked-- one time, I was watching him. And he was eating clay hamburgers.

He was eating clay hamburgers?

Yeah. Hamburger that looked like hamburger clay. He was eating it. I said, what's wrong with that guy? I couldn't believe it.

So he's eating dirt basically?

The what?

He's eating dirt.

Dirt, yeah. So I start thinking. I start making clay hamburger, slap it on the wall. When it dried up, I took it in to him and traded it for a sandwich.

Oh, God.

It was very good for a couple of days. But I guess when he had to go to the washroom, his mother found out there's something wrong. And she start watching him. And she caught me.

Oh. Was this a teacher at the school, at the kindergarten?

Teacher at the kindergarten.

So your plan didn't last long?

No, but for a couple of days, I tasted some bread over there. We didn't have bread at all. But I had some from that kid. So that was--

Was there any--

--one of the memories I had from there.

OK. Was there any kind of indoctrination in the kindergarten? I mean, it's a kindergarten.

Oh, yes. Yes, I remember. One time in the classroom, the teacher said, who is your God? And the Uzbeki kids, I don't know what they said. But she asked us. And we said Jesus. Jesus is our God.

So we waited and waited. The doors were closed. All of a sudden, the doors open. And somebody walked in with a cross with Jesus. And she said, pray to Jesus. So of course, we watch our mother, where she was religious so we were religious too. And we says, oh, Jesus, please give us some bread. We're so hungry.

And she waited. She waited. She says, well, did you get it? No, we didn't get it. So the door is closed. Next minute, the doors open. And they show a picture of Stalin. They said, pray to Stalin. So we says, oh, [RUSSIAN] Stalin, give us some bread. Give us some food. We're so hungry.

And OK, they took the picture of Stalin. And they wheeled in the table with all kinds of food, bread and fruits and everything. And she said, OK, which God is better? Yours or Stalin? And me and Bernice says, Stalin.

Oh, they gave us some food and everything. And we came home. We were so happy. We told Mother, says, oh, we got some-- how did you get it? Well, they told us to pray to Stalin and say Stalin is a good God. And she slapped us. Oh, we got it. And she says Stalin is not a-- he's not God. He's not your God. So she was very, very strict with the religion. And-

She was upset.

--we got it for that.

She was upset that you had gotten this kind of--

Yes. Yes. But that was their way of brainwashing little kids. We didn't know what was going on.

How long did you go to this kindergarten?

Maybe two, three months, three months or so.

OK. So you--

And then the Uzbeki woman-- the [NON-ENGLISH] I told you, the next door, she said to my mother, says, you have so many children. She says, you have to do something. You can't feed them all. She says, I know. I heard that there's Polish army, the army that was formed in Siberia. They're doing the training maneuvers in Uzbekistan.

So she told my mother where the army was. And my mother and my sister Jenny and other women, they went on foot to find the army headquarters, Polish army headquarters, General Anders headquarters, and ask them if they could help us out, take the kids to the orphanage over there, because they created orphanage with the Polish army. They was taking care of the Polish orphans that parent died in Siberia.

And so when they came back, they took me and Bernice and Stanley, because we were the youngest. And they left us over there in the orphanage with the Polish army, the Second Corp, General Anders.

So how far was this? Since this was in Uzbekistan, was where the army was based-- was it far away from where you were living?

The army must have moved in from Siberia for training to the warm climate on horses. They had horses there. I know the big river there. And they're crossing the river on horses. So they're training over there in the warm climate in Uzbekistan.

And so my mother went back to the hut with Jenny. And they didn't know. My mother was very afraid that she was going to lose us, because she left us over there with the army. And they came back over here.

But somehow, later on, they went back to the army camp and start asking them if they could join the orphanage

somehow, maybe work for the kids or something. And the army agreed for my mother to work in the kitchen, in the orphanage kitchen over there. And Jenny would help mother. So we were all together again in the orphanage with the army.

So by now, it was six of you that were left. Your mother, Mary--

Brother Joe--

Brother Joe.

--sister Jenny, Stanley, me, and Bernice.

OK. Mother, Brother Joe, Jenny--

Jenny.

--Stanley, and Bernice.

Yeah.

OK. And brother Joe, what was he doing when you were in the orphanage? You don't know. But he was around. He was with you.

He was with us in the orphanage. He wasn't grown up yet at that time. He was maybe 16 or 15. I don't know.

OK. It's 1942. By this point, it's 1942, beginning of '43.

1942, beginning or middle of 1942, something like that.

OK. And so there you are in Uzbekistan, now with Polish forces. Were there many people there, many other deportees, Polish people who were there? Was it a large place?

What I heard from my mother's story and other people that the people there were freed from Siberia. They all were walking on foot or catching rides or doing whatever they had to do to go to the headquarters of the army. They would direct them where to go and what to do. So there was a lot of Polish people going in that direction there.

Mm-hmm. And do you remember seeing a large number of people when you were there?

No. I was in the orphanage, limited in the area. I didn't go outside.

What do you remember from the orphanage?

Oh, I remember we had good food. We had--

Oh, really?

The army provided good food. Polish army provided good food for us, lots of milk. And we had games for the kids. The soldiers were very friendly to us, making jokes with us and everything. It was like different world altogether.

And there was nobody to tell you that Father Stalin is the one that you pray to get food?

No. No, no, no. That was different world. Most of the soldiers were Polish Catholics, anyway. The Uzbekis had nothing to do with them. The Polish army was on their own from the orders of Stalin to travel south of the maneuvers.

OK. So when you were in this orphanage, do you have any memories of any episodes when you were in the orphanage itself?

Not really. What we did, we were traveling a lot with the army, because the army was moving. Army was going from Uzbekistan. And we were proceeding with the army towards Krasnovodsk.

And what is Krasnovodsk?

It's the Caspian Sea.

So it was a port on the Caspian Sea?

Yeah. The army was going. We were going with the army. The orphans was going with the army to the Caspian Sea, where they put us on the ships over there, and the Pahlevi. They crossed the Caspian Sea to the Pahlevi. I think that was Ear-ran? Ay-ran?

Iran. Well, OK, we'll get to that part. But let's still stay with the orphanage for a little bit. So it's not in one stable, single place. It's on the move. The orphanage is constantly on the move.

Constantly on the move.

And your mother moves with it? And your sister moves--

My mother moves with the orphanage, right, and my sister too.

And your sister too. Do you remember how long it took you to get to Krasnovodsk?

I don't know. We were on the trucks. They called them lorries. The Englishmen called them lorries. And the trucks, it might have been-- I don't know-- a few days. It was days. I don't know exactly how long it takes.

Yeah. But it wasn't like weeks or months?

No, no. It wasn't months.

It might have been weeks, maybe weeks.

OK. And what did you see? What was the landscape like outside of these trucks? What did you see outside?

There was like prairies, steppes, not much of anything. A lot of cotton was growing over there.

Open road? Open? It was open all over the place?

Yeah. It was growing. The Uzbekis grew a lot of cotton and peanuts over there. So when we stayed over there, I remember that sometimes we used to sneak out at night and steal some of those peanuts out from the fields.

Well, that's pretty healthy. Peanuts are pretty healthy. Yeah.

Peanuts were very good. Yeah.

Yeah. And so you get to Krasnovodsk. And what kind of a place was that?

There was mass confusion there, because there was a lot of Polish army soldiers from different areas. A lot of people from-- Polish people-- from different Siberian areas, they're trying to get on the boat to take them over from Russia to Iran.

And so everybody was waiting for the boat. And the boat was like a freight ship. Finally, when the freight ship showed up over there, everybody was rushing, pushing, to get first on the ship, because they couldn't take everybody.

But we were lucky, because we were with the Polish army. So they had priority. And we went on first. So we made it across. They loaded up the ship. Somebody said it was up to 5,000 people or something. And we got across the Caspian Sea into Pahlevi.

How long did that journey over the ocean-- over the sea-- take? It wasn't an ocean.

Caspian Sea? No, it didn't take long. I don't know, maybe day, maybe a day and a half.

Was this in spring of '42 or summer of '42? When did all this happen?

It was more like a summer, more like--

Summer of--

--summer of '42.

OK. OK. And--

No, not summer '42. Wait a minute. It's more like second half of '41.

Well, you said that you left--

No, you're right, '42. It was '42, because in 1942, in December, we got to Africa already. So it was-- yeah.

It was '42?

'42.

OK. So it was the summer of '42. And you go to Pahlevi. And what is Pahlevi? Where was that?

Pahlevi is a very north-end tip of Iran.

Was that a town? Village?

It's a port, seaport.

It's a port. It's a seaport. OK.

Pahlevi.

Did you stay there long?

No, we didn't stay very long over there. The Polish army was separate. The orphanage was separated from the Polish army there, because the Polish army went to Baghdad. And the orphanage was picked up by IRO, International Refugee Organization.

I see. OK.

And so from here on, we were handled by International Refugee Organization, which was-- Englishmen had authority on that. So they loaded us up on the trucks, on the lorry-- English call it lorries-- and hauled us from there to Karachi,

India. That was a long trip going through the mountains and steppes and everything and desert.

We got to Bombay, India.

So, wow. You had quite a journey. You didn't stay in Iran, then?

No, we didn't stay long in Pahlevi, no.

OK. So you go through first to Karachi and then to Bombay?

No, no. We didn't go to Bombay.

You did not?

We stayed in Karachi.

You stayed in Karachi.

In Karachi-- the president of India, King of India, whatever it was-- he gave us permission to stay on the beach. They set up the tents, tent city, on the beach.

And you were, all six, together?

Yes, all six together with the orphanage. So the orphanage stayed on the beach in a tent over there, waiting for a ship to take us to Africa, because they--

Even that was like a transition place. It wasn't a--

Yes.

--permanent place.

Exactly. Over there in that camp, a lot of kids from the orphanage that I know of, that I was with, died over there.

Why?

From typhoid, from different diseases, from Siberia, from hunger, from malnutrition. A lot of kids died over there in the orphanage.

In Karachi?

In Karachi, right. Then when the ship come in, I don't know how long we stayed in Karachi, probably three weeks or so, waiting for the ships. So when the ships came in, there wasn't just one ship. I guess the International Refugee Organization had a convoy of ships. There was like 16 ships surrounding the three ships that the people in orphanage were supposed to go to Africa.

They want to transport us to East Africa because of the warm climate there. And that used to be British territory, Tanganyika, Kenya, Uganda, East Africa. So when the ship came in, they loaded the orphans on two ships-- three ships, rather. And other ships were a convoy protecting us, because there was a war going on. There was a lot of Japanese submarines in the area, German too, Germans, Japanese.

So they loaded us up on the ship. And I think we went like for two weeks or 2 and 1/2 weeks on Indian Ocean to Mombasa in Africa, East Africa, Kenya or Tanzania. I think was in Kenya.

And you think that--

During that trip on the ship, on the ocean, one time, they spotted the Japanese or German submarine. And the submarine fired torpedo in one of our ships with the kids.

Oh, wow. So the ship was hit?

The ship was hit. And so all those kids just disappeared from there.

Did you see or hear anything?

Yeah, we saw that people were screaming, crying. But they couldn't stop. They said the other ships had to go zigzag so they wouldn't hit another torpedo.

And those kids, they're drowning. And the sailors on the ship, they had knives in their teeth. And the kid was grabbing hold of the sailor to save himself. Well, he just cut them loose.

With the knife?

With the knife.

You saw this?

Yes.

Oh, my.

Anyways. [SIGH]

So nobody picked up these children?

I'm sorry?

No other ship around in the convoy picked up--

No, no, they couldn't stop to help the kids, because they were afraid they were going to hit a torpedo from the submarine. So one ship went to Mexico with the orphans. And another ship went with the orphans to Mombasa instead of Tanzania.

And your ship was which one?

We went to Africa. And so when we got to Africa, they unloaded us from the ships. They put us on the trucks to the railroad station again. And by the railroad, they took us over to Camp Tengeru, they called it. It was Polish settlement. Camp Tengeru, they called it. It was round huts already prepared for the refugees, already built by International Refugee Organization or something.

And they took us to the train station there. And the train took us to that Camp Tengeru over there. From there, they took us on the trucks to the camp. There was like 22 camps in East Africa for the Polish refugees from Siberia.

That's a lot.

We had about 5,000 people in our camp.

Wow. That's huge.

And that was supposed to be the biggest one in East Africa. But there were other camps in other places where-- Rhodesia, in Uganda, and South Africa. I don't know exactly how many people they had. But there was a lot of people there.

And you arrived there, remind me again, about when?

We got to Africa about at the end of 1942.

OK, at the end. So was this a place where you stayed for a while, where you didn't move from? Or was this another transitory place?

Well, that place was like a paradise for us compared to Siberia. We had warm climate. We had plenty of food. And the orphanage was taken care of by the International Refugee Organization. We used to get packages from the Polish army. They went to England later on, London. They sent us packages.

And the people from United States and other countries helping out. They found out about the orphanage. So they were helping out with different things, chocolate, candies, with clothing and toys. So we're very happy, happy times in Africa.

Your mother was with you?

Mother was with us. She worked for the orphanage in Africa too, in Tengeru. She was doing the laundry. And she was cooking for the orphans. There was four women like that. There was my mother and three other-- and five other women-- no. My mother and three other women, they were taking care of cooking and washing clothes for the orphans.

And you said there were 5,000 people in total. And about how many orphans were there of those 5,000 people?

I'd say maybe 150 or 200.

Oh, so not that many.

No.

Most of the people were adults or not--

Yes. Yes. Lot of orphans died over there in Karachi and Pahlevi.

They made it out of the Soviet Union. But they died anyway.

They died because they're exhausted, the malnutrition. They didn't have proper food or proper clothing in Siberia. They were not strong enough.

So when you left, when you got to Pahlevi, actually, that's the first part when you're not in the Soviet Union anymore?

Yes. Yes.

How did that feel?

Oh, people on their knees thanking God for escaping from Siberia.

You saw this?

Yes. We did it ourselves.

You got on your knees, huh?

Yeah, my mother made me do it.

So there you were on--

A lot things I didn't want to do. Your mothers do to you.

So the whole family was on their knees on the sand in Pahlevi? Is this it?

No, they were not the whole thing. I think that was just me, Bernice, and Stanley with my mother. I don't know what the other kids were doing. They were probably doing something else. Yeah.

So then when you were in Africa, I can see how you would say it looks wonderful. You get food. It's warm. It's not--

In Africa, we had very good community. They had Polish schools over there. They had the lyceum over there. They had a grammar school. They had a commercial high school. They had mechanical school for the kids. We built our own church over there. And there was one synagogue and--

Really?

--Ukrainian church. Yes, we had some Jewish people that came from Siberia with us. And so International Refugee Organization provided for all these people, helping out.

Talking about the Jewish and the Ukrainian people-- did you know any of them as you were coming over? Or did you meet them in the camp itself?

I met some of them in Germany.

Later?

No. Coming to United States, I met some of them. But I didn't know them before we got to Africa. I know them in Africa, because I was going with Jewish kids to school.

I see.

So I got to know them and their parents.

And had their--

And one of them was a dentist in our camp. Jewish guy was a dentist.

Uh-huh. And did he work, continue his work, as a dentist in the--

He worked as a dentist for the people in the camp. And his kid was going to a commercial high school with me.

So you were the same age?

I'm sorry?

You were the same age?

Yeah, he was the same age as me. Right.

Do you remember their names?

Lech. Lach? Lech? Dr. Lech.

Dr. Lech. And had he been deported to the Soviet Union?

Yes, he was. There was few-- not as many-- but there were a few Jewish families that were deported for some reason. I don't know the political or whatever. But they went through the same thing as we did. And going back to Siberia, there was not only Polish people. But later on, I found out that there are many different nationalities. Even Russian people were in Siberia too.

Yeah. Different people were deported at different times?

Yes, different times for different reasons. Yeah.

Did you ever find out the reason why your family was deported?

There was no-- yeah. The saying was going later on when I was older that the Russians want to take back their land that was given to Poland after First World War. After First World War, the land on the east that was Ukraine, or Russia, was annexed to Poland.

And that's why they had Polish settlers over there and Polish government. So the Russians, they want to take those land to themselves. And they want to get rid of all the Polish people from there and put them in Siberia.

So this was a reason that people were talking about, but it was never an official explanation given--

No.

--to you by the-- OK.

The whole thing was quieted down, especially in the United States, because the United States was an ally with Russia at that time against Hitler. So everybody was talking about Hitler and the Holocaust and what happened to the Jewish people. But nobody want to talk about what Stalin did to Polish people in Siberia. So that was undercover.

And lately, things are coming up now. People are finding out what's been happening.

Yeah. How long were you in this camp in--

Eight years.

Eight years?

Eight years, from 1942 to 1950.

Wow.

Yes.

Wow. And was it from here that you learned about your oldest brother Tadeusz and what had happened to him?

Yes. We had International Red Cross people working in our camp. And they were trying to help find relatives for people that were in Africa. And my mother worked with the Red Cross, International Red Cross.

We found out about our brother Ted, who, after the war-- after '45-- he went from Germany to Poland.

He returned?

He returned. And he got married over there. And he settled in Tarnow, Poland near Krakow.

I see, near Krakow.

Right.

And was that far from the place you originally had been born in and grew up in?

No, not too far. I'd say maybe Tarnow and Rzeszow can go about three, four hours by car.

Mm-hmm. OK.

Yeah.

OK. So you knew that he was alive?

Yes.

You knew that he was alive?

Right.

Now, throughout this whole journey, from the time you were deported till the time you end up in Africa, you had mentioned that, in the beginning, your parents had had differing points of view as should have you moved to--

Liczkowce.

--Liczkowce and that your mother wanted to and that your father didn't. And you also mentioned that, at some point, she regretted this. Do you remember, did she talk about that during the journey or at any point?

In 1946. I know that, because I have a copy of the letter that she wrote to her mother in Poland. She found out from International Red Cross where her mother lived and where my brother Ted lived. So she wrote the letter from Africa.

We have a copy of that. Bernice and I have a copy of the letter to her mother, telling her what we've been through. And she ask her mother to send our birth certificates and other papers, because here she had no papers at all. And she wanted to find out-- she told her about our father's and Mary's death in the hospital over there. Generally, she asked her mother to tell her what's been going on in Poland, because she didn't know anything.

Our mother had a contact with her mother. And we had a contact with our brother, Ted. And so the correspondence started going back and forth. And let's see here. Well, you asked me something.

The question was, did your mother ever express any regret that she had wanted to move?

Oh, yes. And she wrote in the letter to her mother, she says that, with tears in my eyes, I regret the things that I put up my husband, to move to Liczkowce, because if we didn't move, we wouldn't be in Siberia. Because people where we were born-- the place where we were born in Lukawiec-- the Russians didn't take those people to Siberia.

They all stayed?

She regretted that letter that she put up her husband, our father, to make that move.

So she wrote that in the letter to her own mother?

Yes.

Yeah. Did she ever express that to the children? Did she ever talk about it in conversations?

Well, in Africa, women had friends come over. By our house over there, we had two little huts, real round huts like you see in Africa. So they sit over there sometimes on the bench after work. And they're talking about things. So she was telling them stories about how sorry she was that she made that mistake and just put up all the kids through all this and everything, so.

But I didn't hear that. No, I didn't hear it.

Well, It was something she didn't know. And she couldn't have known it. And she couldn't have prevented. But it was an incredible burden for her to have to carry.

Was everybody healthy in Africa from your family?

Yes, very-- well, no. We had malaria. I had malaria twice in Africa. Just about everybody had malaria at one time or another. But we had hospitals over there in Camp Tengeru. If you had malaria, they would put you in the hospital for 10 days. And they gave you quinine and some other junk, pills, whatever it was. Malaria is, one time, you shake in the hot. Next time, you shiver from cold.

Like you're feverish and things?

Fever, yeah. Anyways, a lot of people got sick over there.

Other boys, like my brother Joe and other kids at his age, they joined the Boy Scouts in Camp Tengeru. And they were going on the trips to the jungles or by Lake Victoria. Somewhere, they had jamborees with the Boy Scouts.

Wow.

And so they had a tsetse fly. No, no, I don't really know tsetse fly is, right?

A little insect.

Insect. It's twice as big as the regular fly. And when that thing bites you, you go to sleep for about 10 days.

Oh, my goodness.

And when you wake up, you go like crazy. And most of the people die after they wake up.

Near our camp, Tengeru, there was a town named Arusha, was a real modern town. They had hotels. They had the racetracks. And they had people from India, from Arabia, from Germany-- not from Germany-- England, and France, businessmen over there. So they had a gate. So black Africans, they could work in the city. But in the evening, they had to leave the town. And the gate would close.

And all the trucks that were coming in during the day from different towns or different areas, they had to be inspected by the guard over there on the gate, looking for tsetse fly.

Wow.

They go. And they are looking on the side, under the fenders, on the tires, make sure that they don't-- because tsetse flies are too heavy to fly. They will sit down somewhere. And they get transported to the city. So they are watching for that

tsetse fly so nobody will bring it in, because once the tsetse fly gets in, and they start multiplying, a lot of people can die.

Did any of them bite any member of your family?

No, no. Not that I know of.

OK. OK. And you say the camp was run by the International Refugee Organization?

Yes.

But it was predominantly a Polish camp?

It was predominantly a Polish camp, right.

OK. So--

All these camps, 22 camps, were predominantly Polish.

And the authorities then, in the camp, were they Polish speaking? Who made the decisions for the camp?

In charge of the camp was a Englishman. A English captain was in charge of the camp. In charge of orphanage was Mrs. GroÅ>icka. And she could speak English pretty good. She get along with them pretty good.

The English captain-- general, whatever he was-- many times, he would help out for the orphanage, take us on the trip to Nairobi, for example, for the international shows or something. They were trying to make life easier for the orphans, because they lost their parents and all that. In that respect, it was good. He was in charge.

And they had a British flag up there at the headquarters, a Polish flag. But the camp itself, everything was in Polish. But Englishmen was in charge of the whole thing.

OK. Did you make friends in the camp?

Oh, many, many. All the guys at the orphanage my age, we're big friends.

To this day?

Oh, we used to go to school. And after school, we used to go to the jungle, play with the monkeys.

That sounds so exotic.

Yeah, especially baboons. Those baboons are terrible things. They could pick up a stick and go after you.

Really?

Oh, yeah. They throw the rock or something, oh.

No messing with a baboon then?

Baboons are bad monkeys. Right. They can attack a person.

Did--

We saw a movie one time. We had an open theater out in the open. And of course, they charged us \$0.50 to get in there.

But we used to pick up the empty bottles from the store, wash them, and trade them in for money. And then we had some money to go to the movies. So in the movies, we saw American cowboy movies, Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy, Tarzan, and all those.

So we saw Tarzan one time. And he's always jumping from one vine to the next. OK. The next day, after school, we went to do the same. You know what happened? Broken arms.

[LAUGHTER]

It didn't work out the same as in the movies.

Not like Tarzan--

No.

--did it?

No.

This power of suggestion. So eight years is a long time. It's long enough a time to get very settled in a place. Did everybody--

Well, yeah, I learned how to speak Swahili over there.

Wow.

I was an altar boy. I was a Boy Scout. And I went to grammar school and did commercial high school for three years.

Did you learn how to speak English there too?

We had mandatory English in high school-- or commercial high school. We had mandatory three hours a week of mandatory English.

Do you think you learned it at that time?

The what?

I mean, did you learn it? Did you learn the language?

Oh, yeah, yeah. I could speak. When we left Africa, I could speak English. We used to go to Arusha, where the English spoke in town over there. And I used to speak with the English many times.

OK. How did it come to pass that you ended up leaving this camp?

OK. At the end of 1949, beginning of 1950, they start-- International Refugee Organization-- they change names from IRO to UNRRA. First was UNRRA but then there was IRO. I-R-O, International Refugee Organization. They decided to liquidate the Polish camps because the war was over. And Polish army was [INAUDIBLE] in London over there. Or the money ran out, whatever.

They tried to get those people to different countries. So they're asking different countries for volunteers to take these people from Africa to their countries. So that was New Zealand, Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, all these countries.

All of them are part of the Commonwealth?

Part of Commonwealth. Because a lot of people didn't want to go to Poland because Poland was under communist rule. So they didn't want to go back. So they started to liquidate those camps one by one. And we were the last one. Our camp, Tengeru, was the last one to be liquidated. So all these camps, they finished off. The people were sending people to our camp.

By the end of second quarter or third quarter of 1950, we left from the-- OK. Let me go back a little bit. Canada, for example, or Australia and New Zealand, those countries, they were accepting people. But they had to go through the physical examinations. They had to be perfectly healthy. And if a member of the family was sick, one member, the whole family couldn't go.

Oh.

So a lot of people had sick people in the family. And they were rejected. They couldn't go to these countries. Biggest transport was to Australia, Canada. And New Zealand, that was the biggest one. England, of course. Meanwhile, we located-- before the camp was dissolved-- we located our uncles and aunts in Chicago who immigrated from Poland in 1906.

I see. You had had family members immigrated to the United States.

Yes. So the correspondence started working early 1946. But there was no quota for United States from Africa. So we couldn't go. We just sat there, waited until the camp was--

Closed.

--closed. So we didn't know what to do. We were supposed to go to America. But we had the affidavits, paperworks.

But they didn't tell us when they are going to take us or if they're going to take us. So the deadline was-- by the end of 1950, everybody had to leave the camp. I guess we were decided that we were going to go back to Poland, because there's no other way.

But meanwhile, they figured out-- the International Refugee Organization-- figured out the way to help us out. What they did, they transported us. They sent us to Nairobi for the physical commission for three weeks where they checked our teeth, our ears, our nose, and everything.

And luckily, we didn't have anybody that was sick. So we were OK. And so they attached us to the transport that was going to Germany, Bremerhaven, because there's a lot of Jewish people and other nationalities, refugees, after the war going to the United States. So they put us on the ship in Mombasa on a Italian luxurious ship called Jerusalem.

And we were on the ship traveling through the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea, Suez Canal into Mediterranean Sea-- we stopped at Cairo for a couple of days-- to Italy, to Venice. In Venice, we had a transit camp for three days over there. And then they put us on the train. And the train went through Austria all the way up through Germany to Bremerhaven up north.

And there, we wait in the camp over there for about a month and a half for the ship that was bringing American soldiers to Germany. An empty ship, instead of going back, they loaded up with refugees and take them to the United States.

So in other words, you did eventually get permission to go but only through Germany, not directly.

Yeah, we couldn't go directly from Africa to the United States. So they figured out the way to send us to Germany and go with the refugees to the United States.

I see.

On the quota from Germany to the United States.

I forgot to ask one thing before. Since you were in Africa for such a long time, you were also there when the war ended. And do you remember what that was like? Do you remember hearing that the war is over?

Yes. Yes, when we heard in 1945 that the war was over, everybody was cheering. Everyone singing songs and praying, hugging each other. Everybody was so happy. But at the same time, we knew that Poland-- we had the radios already in Africa. In Africa, we had no running water, no toilets in the house, no electricity. We had lanterns, that stuff.

Latrines.

Camp life. But anyways, they had a YMCA. And they had a church. They had schools. So YMCA had a radio with a speaker on the outside. So people would gather every evening to listen to the news from London.

Oh, I see. OK.

So we found out that was the end of the war. And so that's why people were so happy.

So they broke out-- it was communal. You could see that everybody else had learned and was rejoicing about that. OK. So that was your source of news, was through a loudspeaker?

Yes.

So radio through a loudspeaker.

There was no newspapers, no radios, no nothing.

And did you get any Polish-- I mean, was it broadcast in English or in Polish? Do you remember?

In Polish, from London.

Polish.

They had exiled Polish government established in London. And they were broadcasting to all those different countries where Polish people were.

OK. So in Bremerhaven, you get onto the boat. Do you remember the name of the ship that you were on that took you to the United States?

The General Balloon.

General Balloon?

Yes.

What kind of ship was it?

It was a military ship, military transport ship. On the ship, we had our duties. They assigned as a duty. I had to wash the deck with the mop.

You were now 16 years old, yes?

Yes, exactly.

You're a teenager-- teenager, no longer a little boy.

Yeah. So we're on the ship about nine days. And approaching the New York, we see the Statue of Liberty. And everybody get on the deck and, oh, it's America, America. OK, everybody's happy. So they unloaded us, processed us. And all these people that are coming from Germany, they're lined up. They're spraying us with some kind of solvents so you don't bring a disease to the country or something.

Anyways, we knew where we were going, because we had connections with our families. And when we were in New York, we ask him to put us on the train to Chicago. And we're waiting at the station over there.

And some guy, African-American guy, comes to me and ask me something. Where you come from, sir? I tell him, I come from Africa. Are you joking, he said. No.

Anyways, I forgot to tell you one thing. When I was on the ship, there was one sailor, a Black sailor, OK. And when we were in Africa, it was apartheid-like. The Blacks did not mix with the whites at that time. When he was on the ship over there, I got over there. And I says, hey, are you from Africa?

He says, oh, man, man, what are you talking about? He got so mad at me. Because I didn't know that in the United States, they had different life than the Blacks in Africa. The Blacks in Africa, they were jungle bunnies. They're not civilized as much as guys that are over here already.

So anyway, he got mad. But I didn't know. I didn't know any better. I didn't mean to offend him. I just thought that maybe he was from Africa. Well, I'll talk Swahili to him. Anyways, I know Swahili when we were over there.

One time, Masais caught me and my brother Stanley, because we went up to their villages to cut the Christmas trees for the church. And we chopped some of their trees. And we're crossing the river.

And the Masais jumped us, the spears and the paint on their faces. Scared the daylights out of us. They took our shoes and some of the jackets and everything. We start crying. And they felt sorry for us. They let us go. But some of the experiences of with those Masais, especially, they're very--

Were they aggressive?

Very aggressive people, that tribe. The Swahilis were OK. But the Masais were very bad.

When you got to the United States, you see an African-American who comes up to you. And he asks you where you're from.

Yeah. And then after I told him that and-- I didn't want to ask him any more about Africa, because I had the experience from the other guy. And when we got to talking, he says, OK, I'll see you later. And I knew some English. And I'm waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting. He never show up.

So I says to my brother, Joe, I says, this guy told me he would see me later. He never come in. What's going to happen? And Joe went up there to ask another guy. And he says, oh, don't worry. That's just a figure of speech. They don't mean what they say.

So anyways, they put us on the Illinois Central train. There was--

But I wanted to say, so you got your first introduction to American English.

Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

And to American manners, American habits, yeah, OK.

I'll see you later, he says.

I'll see you later. OK. So they put you on a train to the Illinois Central, yeah?

Yeah, put us on the Illinois Central to Chicago. It happened to be Thanksgiving Day. Snow is-- 1950-- up to here. I don't know if you heard it. But there was a terrible winter, worse than what we got now. And the train got stuck. Somewhere between Chicago and New York, somewhere on the track, the snow was too heavy, something. And the train got stuck for 18 hours.

Wow.

They had a bar on the train. But we had no money. We had no warm clothes, because we come from Africa in the shorts, the bush jackets. It was freezing over there. So we go through the same experience of Siberia, practically. Anyways, it was much better.

So anyways, we got to Chicago. And my brother, Joe, went to the phone. He had to telephone to our uncles in Chicago. He called them up. And he says, you guys wait over there. We're going to get you.

So we sit at the train station hour, two hours, three hours. Nobody shows. Everybody was gone already. And we were the only one left at the station.

So after a while, my uncle came in. Two uncles and their son came in-- with three cars, I guess-- to pick us up. And they took us, loaded us up in the cars and took us to our aunt's house on the south side of Chicago on 5404 South Woods Street. And that's where we stayed in the basement over there for two, three weeks. Everybody got sick and flu because change of the climate.

And my aunt says to my mother, she says, you come from Africa. How come you're not Black? And my mother says, oh, my God. No, Africa is not only for Blacks. They got all kinds of different-- they got Hindus. They got the Arabs. They got the Blacks. They got all kinds of different nationalities, people, international city.

But our uncles and aunts, they had no idea what Africa is all about. 17 years old, they came to the United States and wound up in the coal mine somewhere or stockyards. I don't know. They were not educated--

It was not part of their world.

No.

And yet, you and your family had been through several worlds.

Well, we've seen several worlds, several different kinds of people, different languages. We are all mixed up, all mixed up.

Did it take a lifetime to get unmixed?

I'm sorry?

Did it take a lifetime to get unmixed?

No, not really, because in 1953-- there's a picture of me when I was in the Air Force-- I enlisted in the Air Force.

You enlisted?

I enlisted for four years in the United States Air Force. And they sent me to Germany. So at that time, Germany was still under occupation. So for the first six months were occupied Germany. There's no action, of course.

We had a good time. We traveled all over Europe. The American dollar was worth big money over there. The American soldiers were a good life. So I traveled to Paris, London, Rome, all over, fly for free on US airplanes. It was a very good life.

What a difference. What a difference from your very--

So I made up for the bad times.

Yeah. And is that when you met your brother, Tadeusz?

Brother Tadeusz, yeah, he came. We send them invitation to come visit us in the United States. And he came several times, in fact.

He was a mailman in Tarnow. He had a big family of seven kids, too, by the way. And his daughters are-- my nieces-- are here in Chicago area, three of them. But he died. He died. And they had a house in Tarnow. And his one son lives over there now.

So Ted used to come over here a couple of times-- more than a couple, maybe three or four times. And each time he came over, he stayed for a couple of months. We help him out, whatever we could for him and his family, send some packages, give him money, to help out his family. Because after the war, he was not well off either over there.

So as we're wrapping up-- and I get a sense we're wrapping up-- was there a long term impact of your Siberian experience on you and on other people in the family? Were there markings or effects that you saw everybody have because of what you've gone through?

That stayed in our minds for a long time and stays now. But I don't want to think about it. I said to myself that I'll forgive those people, what they did to us. But I'll never forget it. Things like that, you don't forget. You can always remember that. But to forgive, yeah, I forgive you, because that's water over the dam already. But you still have the memories. Sometimes, you have nightmares.

Do you, still?

Sometimes, not lately, but I used to, years ago. I had a nightmare. Sometime in the middle of the night, I would wake up screaming, because I see somebody trying to kill me. And I picture all those people, all those kids, dying over there, skeletons up there. It's terrible nightmares sometimes. Yeah.

So there's some things that never leave you.

They never leave you, not for me, anyways.

Is there something you'd want other people to understand about what you went through and your family went through?

Well, I don't think that people should feel sorry for me or they should have a bad feeling because of that. But I think that new generation, especially, should know, in this country and all over the world, that there are things in the world and crucial ways of life.

And when people say, oh, I don't have it so good. It's bad for me here. They should know how other people had and how other people tortured because of their nationality, their religion, or their race, or whatever it is.

So there's plenty of evil in this world. But some people that live in the glass houses have never been around. They don't see what's going on. They have no idea. So I think that the story I'm telling you now will be part of the history for the

generations to come.

I couldn't have put it better. I couldn't have put it better.

Thank you.

Thank you very, very much.

Oh, you're welcome.

And this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. John Migut on February 2nd, 2015.

Thank you very much.

Thank you very much. Thank you.