

OK, we're rolling.

OK. Good morning. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Miss Mira Zimmerman, on January 23, 2015 in Chicago, Illinois. Thank you very much, Mira, for agreeing to speak with us today about your experiences during the war and how your life was shaped by it.

I'm going to start by asking you some questions that are before the war. And we'll start at the very beginning. So my first question is what was your name at birth, when you were born?

What was--

Your name when you were born.

I don't understand what--

Could you tell me your name?

My name was Mira Zimmerman, Mira Slawa Zimmerman, actually, because that's the official name.

That's exactly what I wanted. Mira Slawa Zimmerman. And what was the date of your birth?

1934. 1934.

So that would be September 19, 1934?

That's right.

OK. And where were you born?

In Grodno.

Grodno. What--

Poland.

What is Grodno? Is it a town or village?

It's a town on the river Neman.

On the river Neman? OK. And where is it--

The river Neman, it goes into Baltic.

So what part of Poland is this in? Is it the north? The south? The west?

It was the east.

The east.

The Russian side of Poland prior to the outbreak of the second war.

So Grodno, it is part of Poland.

Grodno is-- yes, Poland, but, of course, it has been labeled Russia.

Now. You mean today. It's part of Russia or Belarus.

Well, after Yalta they divided it, shifted the--

I see. They shifted it.

Shifting the borderline sometimes is confusing.

It's true. In the eastern part of Poland, you could be born in one city and live there all your life, and yet live into several countries, depending on how the borders shifted. Tell me, do you have any memories of Grodno? Do you remember what Grodno looked like?

No. No. I remember I was taken to a movie, first time in my life, and I created so much [NON-ENGLISH], everybody else was laughing.

Really?

I was a Shirley Temple movie.

Really? And you remember that it was a Shirley Temple movie?

Well, you have to remember I didn't have video games and other things, so that was a big thing.

So what kind of a fuss did you create?

Hmm?

What kind of a fuss did you create at that movie?

Well, I think it was something about the Shirley Temple movie and Walt Disney's Snow White. She's running, she's running, she's-- [LAUGHS].

So you were saying that.

I was yelling on top of my voice, supposedly.

[LAUGHS]

Which could be annoying, but it could be amusing.

I'm sure when the people heard it was from a little girl they were not annoyed. So tell me again the year you were born. The year you were born. What--

The year that I was born?

Mm-hmm. What was the year? I forgot.

1934.

1934. OK. Your mother, what was her name?

Janina.

And her maiden name?

Szlarinska.

Szlezinska. Yeah? And your father's name?

Rudolf Zimmerman.

That's not a very Polish name, Zimmerman.

Well, no. And I know very little, but my father and I hardly knew each other. That's the way the war turned out.

I see. Do you have any memories of him?

Very little. We managed to communicate up to the second war a little, but my parents were in the process of divorce anyway.

When you were little?

Hmm?

Were they in the process of divorce before the war?

Well, that's what I had been told. There was things were too, let's say, serious matters to be discussed with a child that's five or six. I don't know too much. And later on, things just were different. Mother and I were in refugee concentration camps, being shifted here and there, and--

He was not with you?

He was not with us.

Before we get to those parts of your story--

Hmm?

Before we get there, to those experiences of being refugees, I still want to talk a little bit about your very first years.

My very first--

First years.

Where?

In Grodno.

Oh, in Grodno. Well, how could I tell you very much?

Well, I'll ask some questions.

Oh, OK.

So before the war started, did all three of you live in the same place, your mother, your father, and yourself?

Well, that was the property that my mother inherited. She was in the process of starting berry and fruit gardens.

Oh, really? Tell me a little bit about your mother's family. Your grandparents and the larger family, were they well-to-do?

I can tell you only that I had a picture in my mind of a family portrait of my mother. A very stately, white-colored laces and very [INAUDIBLE]. But that was a [INAUDIBLE] that that portrait was stolen in Russia with the few belongings we had. And that's all I can tell you. I don't remember even my grandmother. And she was supposedly looking after me for a while.

Really? And you have no memory of her?

No. Just that photograph.

What kind of a place did you live in? Was it a large apartment or a house?

The house was in the country, where Mother's property was. That was outside Grodno.

Did it have a lot of land?

She didn't have a lot of land. I don't know. Maybe 80 acres or something.

80 acres?

Something. Something not very big. But I think she was the one that directed the arrangement for the gardens. It was still somewhat in the process of being formed, anyway, at that time. And this is the beginning of war, too.

But 80 acres. If we're talking about eight zero, that's a lot of acreage.

Well, I don't know exactly hectares.

Do you remember how many hectares?

No, I don't remember. But I think it's listed somewhere. I don't remember exactly.

The reason I focus on this, because I want to get a sense of whether your mother's family were landowners.

Well, that property was given by the government because of Mother's brother taking part in the Polish, let's say, rise of that territory. Because you remember Poland was divided before that.

And divided in what way?

Well, divided depending which-- how shall I say? Which-- there is a Polish word and I think it's [NON-ENGLISH]. Poland was divided--

It was partitioned?

--as far as borders. Borders were shifted. And depending on which was-- it was Austrian, it was Russian, German.

And Grodno was in which part part of the territory, of those three places?

As far as I know, it was Russian.

I see. And then, does that mean that your mother's brother took part in some kind of battles or some kind of--

Well, he deserved some compensation from the government because he was in that category of helping those that fought for the liberation of Poland.

Thank you. I wanted to understand how it is that he got some land. So that meant he fought for Polish independence during and after the First World War. Is that correct?

Mm-hmm.

OK. And so the land was then given to him?

Well, the land was given to Mother's parents. After they passed away, they simply-- he and the brother died. And Mother was the owner.

So does that mean she had no other brothers and sisters, just the one brother?

There was a sister also, but she also died.

I see. Do you remember their names?

The brother was Valenti. Well, that's what Mother told me, Valenti. And the sister was Natalia.

Did you ever play in those orchards where she was going to grow berries? Did you ever play outside in those orchards where she was going to grow berries, where she was going to make a business?

Are you asking me if they were planning to start the business together?

No, no. I'm asking if you have any memories of what the land looked like. That's what I want to know. Did you ever go and play there? Did you walk there?

No, no. Nothing, nothing. You have to keep on remembering that the '39, the Second World War, I was merely probably around five or six. A child's memories--

I know.

--are really almost nothing.

I know. I know. But sometimes there's one episode or another episode.

I remember one thing about my father. It's before the war. Once, he came in late. But he brought in a gift for me.

Really?

It was a dog, like a Dobermeyer, but very small. He could put it in his pocket.

Really?

It was that small. And anyway, that dog was my playmate from then on.

What was the dog's name?

The dog's name was Figa.

Figa.

Fig. Fig.

That's sweet. That's very sweet.

Because he could put it into his pocket, it was so small.

That must have been quite a present.

Well, it wasn't the fact that it was a present, but it was the gift itself. I tried to keep that memory of my father. That's all.

Do you remember what he looked like? What did your father look like?

Oh, I remember that because later, we sort of met in England.

After the war?

After the war.

OK. So tell me what--

After the war, he was in a hospital in Scotland, I think, for one, then England. He went-- or he boarded, I should say, with an English family. And when the refugee camps of the Second World War, refugees were dissolved, people were sent everywhere. We couldn't go back because we were afraid the Russians would send us back to Siberia. So Mother and I were brought to England.

OK. We'll get to that part of your story, but right now I wanted to get a sense of how your father looked. Was he a tall man? Was he thin? Was he dark? Was he--

Was the average height. I don't have any photographs, if that's what you're talking, prior to Second World War because anything that was there, it was stolen or ravaged.

And your mother. Told me a little bit about your mother before the war.

She was very energetic. She tried to get those gardens started. My father didn't help any. He had a problem.

When World War II started, it was when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Did your parents talk about that? Do you remember hearing the adults talking about the war starting?

About the what problem?

The war, the World War starting.

I don't remember anything. I was too small to even-- even if I heard any discussion--

I understand.

--to pay attention to anything like that.

Do you remember foreign soldiers in Grodno or in your home?

Well, I remember when the Russian armies entered the territory. There were a lot of sabotage. We had to dodge the bullets in Grodno.

Oh, so you were in Grodno, and there was shooting going on in town?

The what?

There was shooting so that you had to dodge bullets?

There were--

You're saying there was a lot-- people had to dodge bullets in Grodno.

Yeah, well, my mother had a infection of some sort. I don't know why she had that, but she needed medical attention. And she had to look for a way to get to the hospital. She left me with some people, and she went to get the medical attention. And in the process of crossing parts of Grodno, you had to watch out, as I said, dodge the bullets. They were still fighting certain sections. It was very frightening. But other than that, I can't tell you other than--

When it settled down and supposedly law and order was established all over again, and the Russian system--

Was implemented?

We returned to the country home. And found that we didn't have the keys to the house. We didn't have simple things that are required to live. We were robbed.

So while you had been in town--

The house was torn apart. There was nothing. Mother didn't have a pot to cook in.

Who did that?

Some neighbors returned some of the items that they thought we didn't need again.

Who did the robbing?

Well, when the partisans, when the law changed from Polish to Russian, then back to Polish, it was so some -- Somewhat frightening, but we had very little that we could take with us when they took us to Siberia.

So was it Polish partisans or Russian partisans who had robbed you?

Te what?

You said it was partisans who robbed your home, your country home. Somebody had come in and taken everything.

Well, there were partisans ravaging the country. The -- partisans were Russian paid whatever, and there were also German paid for them. And they ravaged the country.

I see. I see.

It wasn't-- with us, it was only Mother that looked after me. My father was called to the armies when the war broke out.

I see. So he had to report to his military unit. He was not there.

No.

He was not there.

No, he wasn't there.

So do you remember the night or the day that you were deported to Siberia?

The night? Well, you heard the thud of the horses running, circling the house. Then the dog started yapping.

Figa?

And in Russian, [NON-ENGLISH]. Get up and get dressed.

Who was at home? Just you and your mother?

Just me and my mother.

That must have been terrifying.

The what?

It must have been terrifying. Scary. It must have been very frightening.

Oh, it was. It was scary. It was. But I was confident because my mother was there.

So what happened? Did they come into the house? You said they were circling and you heard the hooves.

They just circled. They're going in. Barged in. The few items that we still had were put on the sleigh, and we were marched up to the railway station.

Do you have any idea why they came to arrest you?

You didn't need that. The Russians needed free labor, and this was that free labor.

But why you? Why your mother? I mean, what can a five-year-old child do with free labor?

Well, that's-- you can ask [INAUDIBLE]. And I never had any explanation that was logical.

So you didn't know.

We didn't participate in any political uprisings or whatever right now. We tried to simply live and survive on what we still had. But the Russian command decided that they wanted additional thing. They wanted our labor force.

Well, one of the reasons I asked about the land earlier is that sometimes--

The mark?

About your land, how much land your mother had.

Oh, that. We didn't have much land. It was just like a small farm.

Sometimes the people who were deported were those who had land.

Well, there were, of course, some people that did have, but we didn't. Or Mother didn't.

So did your father find out what happened to you?



We didn't hear from him.

Was he deported eventually, too? The next time you see him, he's in England. Was he arrested by anybody?

In Poland?

Your father, yes.

He wasn't arrested. In Russia, about halfway through the war, Stalin and Hitler got at each other's throats. And at that time, it was-- you were asking just now if he was arrested. He was with us, sent to the same camp.

Oh, so when they came to get you--

To the same camp by the Russians. But when the war ended, or during the time that the--

Can I interrupt? I'm going to interrupt. Hang on just a minute. When the soldiers came, the Soviet soldiers came to arrest you and deport you, were you alone with your mother and nobody else?

Nobody else.

So your father was gone.

My father was called to the army, and nobody could get communication. Because there was a break in communication.

Of course. Of course. But then, later, you say he was in the same camp with you.

Well, that was in Siberia.

So what happened to him? How he get to Siberia?

After Yalta, he was-- the men who were called, they could join Polish units that were being formed to help Stalin.

Yes, that's in 1941.

That's right.

So was your father a prisoner of war at that point?

At that point, he was first arrested by the Russians. But then the Polish units were formed. And supposedly we lost total contact with him.

I see. I see. OK.

He had to be in one of the units that were being formed to help Stalin. But Yalta--

Yalta is in 1945. The Yalta Agreement is after the war.

Well, this was--

Can we break for a second, please?

Absolutely. Pausing?

Yeah, we're pausing. Hang on a second. [INAUDIBLE].

But what happened then, I don't know.

OK. So when she was arrested, they were separated.

There was--

Correct.

So they were not together when they were arrested. Somehow he ended up-- he was a soldier, too, with that same that her uncle was fighting in. So he also-- he would have been arrested for being a soldier in Pilsudski's army, essentially.

And then when he got to the labor camp, they weren't together, but they were there in that camp. But they weren't together. And then, shortly afterwards, what she's talking about, he went to prison. And then when Hitler attacked Russia, he was let go, just like my father was let go, into that Polish army. So she doesn't really know how he got to the labor camp.

Yeah. But I was confused because he was with them in the labor camp, and yet he wasn't with them--

For a very short time, but he wasn't in the same accommodation. They were separated.

They were sep-- OK, fine. So let's go back to the moments in the night where you and your mother are taken by sleigh from your home with the few items that you have, and you're taken to the train station.

Yeah.

What happened then? What did you see when you got there?

Well, they stuff you in the shelf-type wagons that they transport cattle in, and take you to Siberia and the wasteland.

Did you know that at the time? Did anybody tell you where you were going?

No, you don't get any kind of information. Did you ever see the film, Doctor Zhivago?

Yes.

Well, that scene when they were cleaning the debris from the train? That was a routine thing for the transportation.

I can't imagine, as a five-year-old child, what kind of a feeling you had. Weren't you terrified?

What kind of what?

A feeling. You know, when you're taken from the middle of the night on a sleigh to a train station. Were you terrified?

Of course. I mean, the child-- it doesn't translate in the same tune, it seems. I could hold my mother's hand, so that was reassuring, but other than that--

Were there other children on the train?

The wagons were packed. The whole train was like that.

Do you remember anything about the journey?

The what?

About the time you were on the train, on those cattle cars.

Do I remember what?

The journey, the moments, the days you were on the train, what it looked like.

The Germans?

The journey, the trip. When you were on that train. You were there for a while, yes?

Well, the train took a while, but did I remember what?

Do you remember anything about what the place looked like? The cattle car, the other people?

Well, as I pointed out, that scene in Doctor Zhivago with the prisoner being shackled and cleaning the debris.

The debris.

But other than that, we didn't really have very much. There was this place that once we get part of the road, we had to go by sleighs. And it was a very stormy night. And Mother had a problem trying to keep me alive because then the sleigh kept turning over. It was very difficult for her. The driver couldn't see very well, so Mother had to help out.

But they got us to a place where they gave us some hot washed-down soup. But it was hot, so they gave us that.

And what did they give you to eat on the train itself?

Nothing.

How did you feed yourself?

Some people had some supplies. Those that had it got fed, and those that didn't, had problem.

Did anybody die on the way?

I don't remember.

OK. Do you remember the name of the place you were taken to?

No.

Do you remember what it looked like?

It was like a army settlement thing. Sort of a camp that was no longer in use.

You mentioned that when the soldiers came to deport you, you heard the hooves of their horses and they took you by sleigh. Does that mean you were deported in wintertime?

Deported?

Taken from your home. Was that wintertime?

But who are you talking about?

Yourself and your mother.

We were there in the wintertime, all the time.

The first deportations that I have heard of from Poland were in February, 1940. Were you part of those deportations that took place in February, 1940?

What? I can't, I can't.

Can we stop please?

Yes, we can. Stop [INAUDIBLE].

Let's stop again for a second.

We're stopping. OK, rolling.

So people in the cattle cars, nobody fed them. If they had food with them they were OK. If they didn't have anything, they have problems.

Yeah. Well, I think they used the water that cooled the engines in the locomotives to make some broth or something like that, I think. So that was part of the quota of food that we got. But in the wagon, in the cattle cart, there really wasn't very much assistance except guards to make sure that you stayed with the train.

Would they shoot people? Did they shoot people if they tried to run away?

I don't think anybody tried to, but they just had-- there was one moment that I remember in the cattle train. We were passing certain points along the route. And all of a sudden the whole train started crying. It was the border. And someone started singing one of the prayer songs.

So when you were leaving Poland. When you were leaving Poland and you were passing the border, people realized it.

Well, it was a very moving moment, but.

When you got to where they took you, you were then taken by sleigh. And the sleigh kept overturning?

Well, that territory had a very bad snowstorm, and we were right in the middle of it. But we had some kind of soup, I think. We were fed a little. Other than that, I don't remember.

When they took you to the place that had been an army barracks, you told me, yes? It had been some sort of military place. Was that correct?

I don't know if it was a [? quote ?] my label of describing it as a military place, but it was arranged sort of like what you come across sometimes, the old, unused, no longer used military camp or station.

And was it a huge place? Was it a big place with lots of people in it?

No, it wasn't particularly big place. Just a few barracks.

And then that's where you had to live, was in those barracks? Is that where you ended up living, in those barracks?

Yeah. More or less. I don't remember what was in between.

Were they heated?

What?

Was there heat in those barracks? Was it warm inside?

Well, there's plenty of wood. So you had to make your own wood.

Your own fire? Did people make their own fire inside the barracks?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, I think you could use the facility that they had. There were two camps that they moved us to, Mother and I, but I don't remember very much about the one. I just remember that Mother had to work very hard as a lumberjack.

She was a lumberjack?

I remember that.

Did you go with her when she worked? Did you go with her when she was--

No, I was in a camp. But Mother had two, quote, "jobs" in order to give me sustenance. After work, she tended to my needs and her own.

It sounds-- are you-- all right. Let's pause.

So your mother must have had an incredible, hard life there.

Well, she did, and I was partially responsible. I was a burden. She could do so much. A woman can do so much, but in her case, we didn't have possessions so we could exchange and sell things. We didn't have very much to sustain us.

Did anybody help you?

No. It was one incident. I had some kind of an infection on the foot. And they sent me to the [NON-ENGLISH] or the doctor in the camp. Just stayed with the kids that were-- the husband was with the family and they allowed the woman to stay and look after the child or children.

But usually in a case like this, you don't work, you don't eat. And when the supplies came in, sometimes the supplies were somewhat ridiculous because they would send ball gowns at the time that you need warm boots. So you couldn't--

Crazy!

You couldn't even buy things.

Was the camp part of-- was it isolated from other buildings? Was there a village nearby?

No. The distances were considerable, for one thing. And secondly, you didn't have any maps or whatever. And that territory was wild.

Were there any local people that you met there?

No.

So your only interaction, the only contact you had was with other people who were deported and the guards.

And the guards, yeah. Something on that order.

Was there a fence around the camp? Was it like a prison?

There wasn't no need. Nobody knew where to go.

So you were in the middle of nowhere.

Although I think some sections did have barbed wire. But I don't remember too much.

Is this the place you stayed for a long time?

Well, the longest time that the camps were in operation, supposedly. The beginning of the second war. And when Yalta release started forming--

You mean-- hang on just a second.

Started forming.

Cut.

Cut.

Yalta directed or released several thousand prisoners that they were supposedly ready to form units to help Stalin fight Hitler.

I'm a little confused. I'm a little confused because I thought it was when Germany attacked the Soviet Union, then there weren't enough soldiers to help defend the Allies. And the Polish government in exile came to an agreement with Stalin.

Yeah.

Was that it?

That's it.

That's it. Then that's why these units were formed.

Well, that's why the units were formed. And the Polish government or Polish forces outside Russia tried to participate and start these units that also helped some civilians. And we were the civilians.

How did you find out about it?

Well, someone managed to get out of prison and work himself back to the camp and tell us about it, although the Russians were supposed to inform us. They didn't.

They didn't. I see.

We found out, or at least I was told the residents of the camp found out when this guy came in from prison after he was released.

I see. So did people then-- let's say they know now that they can leave, but the guards don't let them? Did they let them leave when they found out? Or did they still say, no, you can't?

You didn't say anything. I mean, they'll had to admit that you can go and try and join some of those forming units. But nothing was certain.

Mother decided to try and join those units. She told them she would give me to a [NON-ENGLISH], which is like an orphanage. She would give me to the orphanage and she would join as a nurse. That worked fine, and she got the permit that she could do so.

But the commandant left for some business or something. And then the next commandant didn't know about the release what they had, and the assistant wouldn't OK it. So Mother decided to join the sleigh that took the men to join one of the units nearby.

Somehow it was difficult for her to get a few pieces together and join the sleigh as it left the camp. We walked. We walked past the commandant, but Mother didn't have a permit to leave the camp any longer, so we ran away.

This is that place that was in the middle of nowhere?

Yes, it is.

In those barracks?

It is.

And you ran away from there?

Well, we ran away because that was a way to, quote, "freedom."

But how did you know where to go?

We went with the cart. That's why the man stopped the horses for a while. Somehow Mother and I made our way to get a ride from them. Once they had a ride from them, we stopped by a riverboat.

Was this in summertime? Was this in summer? Or was it in winter?

Oh, in the winter.

Oh, you ran away from the camp in winter?

In winter. And were these men who stopped the wagon, were they Polish men who were on their way to join the units?

Well, these were Polish soldiers with families, the farmers of the area. So Mother was trying very hard to spare me and tried to keep herself still in a reasonable condition.

Did you get sick when you were in the camp?

Did I?

Get sick when you were in this camp?

In the camp, no. But later on, in the south of Russia, that's when a lot of sickness started.

And your mother, did she get sick in the camp, or did she stay healthy?

Mother managed to stay healthy, although some of the situations they put her through to work were not healthy.

Can you tell me a little bit about those situations?

Well, the forest that they made her work, the trimmed wood trunks that were floated down the river, they got stuck sometimes. They made the women-- well, both men and women-- work the logs, move them. And they would wear rubber leggings of some sort up to the waist, but most of those leggings were torn so there were freezing water that the prisoners had to work in.

That's horrible. It sounds like--

Yeah, some of the situations that they were put through were inhuman, it seems.

I can't imagine what it was like for her. I said, I can't imagine what it was like for her. And for you. And for you.

Well, it was difficult. It was difficult for Mother. There were other families, but if the man could work, it helped the woman. But those that didn't have the man, or those whose other members of the family were in prison, let's say, it still-- it was prison within the prison, it seems.

What did you do when she was at work?

The what?

What happened to you when she was out working?

When she was out working, I was with the other kids in the camp.

Was there a school?

I remember there was some school, but at that time, weather was warm.

And when you were with the other kids, did you find playmates?

Did I what?

Did you find playmates? Were there other children for you to play with?

Yeah. We played children's games.

I remember reading that somehow your mother found a goat. Was that at this camp?

That sometimes-- my mother bought a goat.

She bought a goat?

Yeah, she had some gown or something, and she-- I was in need of some better nourishment, and that was Mother's solution.

Did it help?

She bought a goat. Well, that goat gave half a glass of milk. That was my--

And did other people in the camp know you had a goat?

Yeah, they knew. If you could feed the goat, that's what--

That's my next question. She had to feed not only you, but also the goat.



Yeah.

How did she do that?

She told me to go along the road to pick up some hay.

And were you allowed to do that?

Well, I was picking up that which fell on the ground, so I could do it. But one time they said that Mother was responsible for me and my stealing the goat.

Stealing the goat or the hay?

Stealing the hay. And they sent her to the court. She had to walk for several miles, I think, to the court station.

Where you were accused of having stolen hay.

She had to follow the telephone lines. That was the direction.

What happened?

Well, nothing. The commandant assistant that took part in that particular project told the judge that he would not take responsibility of Mother's negligence. Supposedly, at the same time, Mother had a little mishap or unfortunate accident when a tree had pivoted. They were cutting down the tree, and the tree pivoted. And instead of going east, it went west, or whatever. And Mother was in that area, and she froze. She couldn't move.

The tree fell on her?

Of course she did. You know how it is when you're scared of something. She fell between the piled up branches. And the branches saved her.

I see.

So the tree sort of was propped by other trunks.

So she was saved, but she was stuck.

They helped her out after everything settled down, but it was a little difficult.

Were there any other such difficulties that she and you had in that camp, either with keeping warm or trying to get food?

Well, that was always a problem. Mother pretended she smoked the tobacco. She could exchange some, a guy that stopped by there from time to time.

Did she get tobacco as a ration?

She could buy tobacco at the store. She could also then take the tobacco to one of the villages that stopped by. And they would give her potatoes or-- I think it was mostly potatoes. I don't know if there was--

So, food. She would get food for the tobacco.

That was the way to get some food.

[Technical adjustments]

OK.

Pause. And we're rolling.

To keep clean. You were going to tell me about keeping clean.

Oh, to keep clean, the blankets or clothing. We had to boil ashes in water and disinfected that way.

You mean you would put the blankets in the water, and ashes--

With the ashes, the wood ashes.

What would the ashes do?

Well, they disinfect, mostly.

Really? I never knew that.

Well, that's what we were told. I didn't know any other way. There was also another method. We tried to shake out or somehow-- I don't remember how they did it, but the barracks were infested with field lice.

With field lice. OK.

And that was very annoying. I don't know if you are familiar what I'm talking about.

No.

But they smell quite atrocious. And they are like lice.

Were there bathing facilities? Was there a place to take a shower?

No. No, no bathing. You had to take care of yourself. From time to time someone got a problem. They had a problem with some medical issue, and sometimes they would just send them to the camp doctor. But there was nothing else.

Now I want to ask you about when your mother got in trouble for the hay that was for the goat. Did you actually take hay that you shouldn't have? Or was it somebody accused you of it?

No. This was something that dripped from the cart.

And so it was perfectly OK.

It was OK.

And somebody then just accused her anyway of taking hay she shouldn't have.

Well, they wanted, I think, to take advantage of Mother's strength and make her work a little further.

Did she get a punishment for it?

Well, I think she didn't get the full salary that, quote, "she earned."

I see. What happened to your little dog, Figa?

Old Figa? At the last minute, as the sleigh was about to start for the railway station, Figa jumped into the snow and disappeared.

Oh, so you had been taking her with you?

We were sort of planning to. Because that was my one thing that I treasured.

Did you make friends with other people in that camp?

Of course. there weren't that much. There was time for any, quote, "friendly" relations. If they had husbands with them, they sort of supplied some nourishment to the situation.

When you said your mother found out about these Polish units being formed, and she was going to sign up to be a nurse, and she arranged that you would be in an orphanage, would that have been staying in the camp? Or would that have been an orphanage of Polish children moving with the unit?

It was being the same as in camp. You couldn't trust the Russian authorities. There were kids that were picked up at the railway stations and other places that spoke maybe Polish, but once they were taken to the orphanages, they disappeared from existence.

So it was not to a Soviet orphanage she would have left you?

Well, it would have been the Soviet orphanage, but not for the Polish kids so far.

I think we should break here.

You know, I was trying to not interrupt.

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mira Zimmerman on January 23, 2015. And before the break, Mira, we were talking about your mother having learned that Polish prisoners were being released from the labor camps in Siberia. And she at first makes arrangements to leave in one kind of way, and then the commandants change. And then she tries another kind of way. And you two end up leaving with some other people on a wagon, going towards the river. And can you tell me a little bit about--

The riverboat [INAUDIBLE].

To the riverboats. Can you tell me a little bit about that riverboat journey?

Well, it was a little, I think, frightening to all, in a way. But there was an incident where a girl, maybe younger than I, fell into the water and they didn't stop the boat, didn't try to retrieve her.

She was just left there to drown.

They just left her to drown. The body was dragged after the boat.

Oh, my. Oh, my. Did you see this?

Mother covered my eyes. They didn't want me to look, but tried to distract me.

Was the boat full of people?

Yeah, it was packed.

And who was running the boat? Was it the Russian officials, the Soviet officials?

The Russians were running the boat.

So the Soviets were in charge of transporting you.

Well, this was a way of transporting, the waterway traffic.

And where did they take you?

Hmm?

Where did they take you?

Oh, they were simply trying to get to the centers of the formation of this new, quote, "addition" to the Russian army.

The Russian army? Or the Polish army?

The Polish army, but it was in Russia and under Russian jurisdiction.

Where did you land? Where did you finally end up?

Well, I remember having to wait for several hours. And I got very scared. I was all alone. The individuals from that labor camp had to register, to pull out some papers. And it took quite a few hours to get there, to do the signing up, and to come back. I was scared that I would be left alone, that Mother was arrested.

It was somewhat frightening thing because I was by myself. But before, there were other people around. But at that point the people left, and those that were from our labor camp were trying to get those papers signed up and cleared.

Were you already off the boat when you were waiting for it?

We were on a dock.

You were on a dock. Do you remember the name of that place?

Oh, no. I don't remember.

Did your mother return? Did your mother return?

Oh, of course. Mother returned, but I guess they had some money allotted to those from our boat, the, quote, "released prisoners." Mother bought a doll for me.

Really?

To try to distract me from what was going on, what we were going through.

And she bought for you there?

Anyway, Mother bought a doll at that place. And that doll unfortunately didn't last very long. Someone stole it from me, so. It didn't really mean very much, but that's all Mother could do is to distract me and not to be scared or something.

Where did you go from there?

Well, that was another place. I don't remember the sequence anymore, but it was another place that collected, you might say, units for that formation of that army.

And so that means you were amongst Polish military people?

Military people, mostly Polish. That's what we had to deal with from then on for some time. Simply after finding out that we could leave the Russian free labor camp's jurisdiction, we still needed assistance. So the army unit very often fed some of the civilians. We got some food that way.

Oh, I see. So the Polish army units were feeding some--

They started these refugee camp centers.

How were you housed? Were you living in barracks again?

In barracks, or in the local housing that was available. Some of them had, especially in southern Russia, they had [NON-ENGLISH], mud huts with a vent.

Did you live in that? In those?

We did.

By this point, was it still wintertime, or was it already warmer?

It was still cold.

Did get sick--

Mother and some men got together and, quote, "robbed" a storage of white beets.

White beets?

White beets, which are really sugar beets. And those white beets were so delicious when they were roasted in a campfire.

Oh, really?

Yeah. But anyway, the men talked my mother into being brave enough. Mother was brave. She didn't need talking into. But anyway, Mother consented to join them on that excursion of helping ourselves from some. These were stored, I think, for the army or something like that in big just storage, sucked up beets. Big frames.

Other than that, were you hungry there? Were you hungry in this place?

We were hungry. We were fed at the beginning. I guess these might have been-- or, no. Maybe that was a little later. But at one point in our journey going south in Russia, we would get [NON-ENGLISH]. [NON-ENGLISH] was something like a deep dish pizza.

Really? With tomatoes?

But it wasn't filled with any. It was just a loaf like that. And they eat it with-- I don't know that they had something that they were eating it with, but they gave some to the prisoners.

But you weren't prisoners anymore.

No, we weren't prisoners. I don't know how to distinguish them. To the--

Refugees?

To the refugees.

Is this like a flat bread that you're talking about? It was a flat bread?

It's not flat. It was something like a bread that's thick. But it was round. It was in a round form usually.

Did you get sick in this place? Remember you told me earlier you got very sick when you went south.

That's right. First of all, someone caught something that registered very high temperatures. And she was taken to the hospital. This was in a, quote, "mud house," in a [NON-ENGLISH]. And they were taken to the hospital, which was several miles away. But you could get some assistance. And the individual, after some time, came back. And at that point, two other people and myself had-- it was typhus or something. It was a rather serious problem. And anyway, Mother suffered quite a bit.

Did she catch it?

She didn't have anything to give me. The food was bad. The medical attention was normal for that particular area, but we were already rather weak. We didn't have enough nourishment.

At that hospital, heating was bad. There were windows that were broken. Mother was scared I would get pneumonia or something, and that would be the end. And she visited me. She had to walk most of the time. But I managed to get out.

So you got better.

Later on, Mother got it. So now you had the same problem.

Was this in the area where the Polish military units were being formed?

Well, it was in that general area. There was a push of the units and the camps going south. So the next one would be out of Russia, the Caspian Sea. We were taken on a boat and ended up in Persia.

Do you remember anything about the journey?

Germans?

No, no, no. The trip on the boat.

Oh, the boat. Over there, I don't remember very much at the time, but later on in that particular area by Persian Gulf, I saw the submarine that was supposedly the remains of a German attack.

Oh, really?

There was a sudden warning signs, warning of the danger to wear a life jacket because the boat might be bombed just like the other.

So you had to wear those life jackets.

Masts sticking out from the water.

How were you able to get on these transports?

Out of what?

How were you able to leave Russia? Well, not Russia, but the Soviet Union. How are you able to leave there, because neither you nor your mother were military people. How were you accepted to go?

They made arrangements. Once the people got to this certain point, they made arrangements to get to Persia, and then to some other near Mediterranean area. A point. Some of my friends, for instance, were in Libya and--

Oh, really? From Russia?

Yeah.

Directly from Russia. Or directly from the Soviet Union, I should say.

Directly from the Soviet Union.

Do you remember much about that boat trip besides the--

The what?

Do you remember anything else from the boat trip besides the submarine?

Boat trip. Which boat trip you talking about?

The one going from--

On the river?

No, going from the Soviet Union to Persia.

Oh, that. Well, I know that prior to getting to Persia, I had to walk a stretch of, I don't know, several miles, but I don't remember how much. But I remember it from the fact that my shoes were stolen and we had to walk on sand. And it just was very hot sand. And I suffered something terrible. I would step a few steps and Mother had to put something on the ground so I could cool my feet.

Oh, dear. So it took a long time.

Well, it took a long time.

It seems that people were doing a lot of stealing. You lost a lot of things.

Well, they help themselves as they, quote, saw fit,

Your doll was stolen. Your shoes were stolen.

Well, I missed the family photograph that was stolen.

And the family photograph that was stolen. Oh, my. Did your mother make friends with any people at all on this journey out of the Soviet Union?

Well, my mother became a Red Cross nurse. That was in Persia. That helped us a little, but otherwise it was difficult. We didn't have very much. On our journey from this northern part to the southern territory in Russia, [INAUDIBLE] but those places-- we had oh, i can't --

Excuse me?

Now, I was going to try and recall how Danuta's father and mother-- it was one of those collective centers that were forming a new addition to the Russians armies.

The Russian or the Polish army?

The Polish army, but the Russian directives are right there. Anyway, the Polish army, he was taking his unit for exercise. And I recognized that it was him.

Who was this person you're talking about?

That was-- anyway, he was just taking his unit for exercise, and I recognized him and run up to him. Mother, Mother, this is-- I forget what he told me to call him, but we made friends one time. I was warming myself there at some kind of a stove, and that's how we met.

Did this gentleman come up to you?

No, this officer did not come up to me, but sort of examined me, looked at me. Later, we found out he had two daughters my age, more or less, so that was more like the connection.

Anyway, once I was trying to warm myself again, and the stove, the burner was cooling off. There was almost no heat. So I knew him, and I recognized him as he was marching with his unit.

And the same as your mother did?

I introduced them. And that's how they, quote, "met" and, years later, got to know each other a little better.

What was his name?

Vavjinitz Soletski.

Could you say that again? His name?

Lawrence Soletski. Vavjinitz Soletski.

Lawrence Soletski?

It's Danuta's father.

I see. So Danuta is your sister?

She's my sister on my mother's side.

I see. And so, in other words, your mother's second husband. You introduced her to her second husband.

Yeah, that was the unusual part of circumstances.

And that was still when you were in the Soviet Union?

That was in the Soviet Union, with the forces being formed to form Polish units. I think it's the Fifth Army that had the Polish forces.

And then you didn't see-- then you left for Persia? And after that, you left for Persia?



They put us in buses, and some crazy drivers started driving crazy way on the very mountainous area.

Oh, you mean in Persia?

In Persia, yeah. The drivers smoked some drug, whatever, and really-- there were precipices right next-- straight wheel.

Oh, my goodness.

You would swear it would fall through, and that was sort of frightening, but.

But you'd been through a lot of frightening things.

Well, my mother tried to, like all the other mothers, tried to quiet the kids, reassured them.

And by this point, how old were you?

[INAUDIBLE] I wouldn't be-- I would be about 11, maybe 10.

How long did you stay in Persia?

I think we were there about two years, Tehran.

What was life like for you in Persia?

Hmm?

What was life like for you there?

There was no difference. We were refugee camp. They dumped us here, then they dumped us somewhere else, and so on, and so on. They did the best they could, maybe.

Did you get enough food?

Oh, we had a reasonable amount of food, I suppose.

And what about your mother? Was she working?

In Persia, she started work as a nurse with that camp hospital, whatever.

What were the facilities like? Were they different than they had been in the Soviet Union? Were there places to take baths?

I think there were something with the-- we were both in tents and they were-- we were told that those were stables that the Germans kept the horses in. This was now a rather hot season and a hot country. Every noon or so there was a sandstorm.

Every day?

Almost every day. And it was so unusual for us. We couldn't breathe almost. We wet the clean sheets that we had and covered ourselves, and just stayed under the wet sheets until the storm passed. Otherwise, you could hardly breathe.

My goodness. What a situation.

Yeah, well, we were there for a month. I don't know how long. But we were glad to move somewhere else. Anyway,

that particular experience was rather unusual.

So you didn't stay there for a very long time?

I don't remember it, but all together maybe over a year, year and a half. But you have to keep in mind all the time listening to me rattle on, it's some--

You're not rattling on. [LAUGHS]

It was-- it was different, but Mother managed to get better, let's say, assistance because she was a nurse. And that made it that much better.

Did you go to school at any point?

These camps always had provisions of some sort of school and some sort of medical possible assistance. Those that had relatives in the army had better assistance. We didn't have any assistance, so Mother was the only one that took care of that.

It's amazing what she was able to do.

Well, it was difficult.

Did she ever cry? Did you ever see her cry?

No. Well, I did, but it was in a totally different situation.

Not during these years?

No.

Did you ever cry during this time?

When my feet were burning.

What about when you lost the doggie?

What? When Figa ran away, did you cry then?

The what?

When Figa ran away, did you-- Figa, your little dog.

Oh, when Figa ran away? I did cry then, yes. We were trying to get that little dog out because it jumped into rather deep snow. likely he froze.

It sounds to me that you didn't have much of a childhood.

Well, we are born and we die. Some of it has many turns and twists, and some of it is smooth.

That's true. And so you have a lot of turns and twists early on.

Yeah.

What happened after Persia? You said you were there in Persia for a couple of years.

Yeah. Well, Mother and I were there, but the Fifth Army went to Libya and Syria, and ended up in Egypt and Italy. That's how the armies went. Those that had some sort of contact with someone in the army had some support. And those that didn't, well, they were in a refugee concentration camps. They had to put them in the places where they can get to them or assist them.

And did you say you moved from one camp to another within Persia?

In Persia, I think there were two camps that we were in.

And then how is it-- I assume you left Persia at some point.

They just took us south, keep on going south from Persia to India. India to England, and then over here.

When you first went to Persia, it was probably in 1941 or 1942, something like that?

It would be Persia? Yeah, about that.

OK, and if you stayed there a few years, so that makes it about '44. Where did the war end? Where were you when the war ended?

When the war ended, exactly, I think we were in India.

You were in India. And how is it that you were taken to India? Why India?

They had opened-- they had one of those unused camps, and the accommodation was there. Just the money had to be allotted to feed us.

So was this a British camp?

This particular camp, Mother worked as a-- oh. What do you call-- not uh -- I'm looking for the word and I can't. Not refugee camp. I'll think of it when I go out.

Of course. You always remember things once everything's all done. You'll think of it a few hours from now.

Orphanage.

She worked in an orphanage.

The camp was mostly orphaned children, part orphanage. In other words, they had only one parent, or they were missing two parents. But Mother was working there. The refugee camps, they were trying to run permanent settlements, whatever. There was a school. There was a church, that kind of thing.

Was this run by Polish authorities or British authorities?

Well, it was run by Polish authorities, but the funds came from the government that was on temporary jurisdiction.

You mean the Polish government in exile?

The what?

The funds came from the Polish government in exile? Doesn't matter. I was just trying to wonder, these facilities, who did they belong to?

I think the country that they were in.

So if it was in Persia, it would belong to the Persians. If in India, it belonged to--

Well, I think so. I don't think that ever came up.

OK.

A good question. But they were used as refugee concentration camps.

And tell me, Mira, when you were in India, you said you went to school there, and there were churches to go to.

Yeah.

So it sounds like a little bit of a more normal life.

Well, that's what they tried.

How long did you stay there, with your Mother, in India?

India, I think we were about four years.

That's a good long time. What part of India were you in?

Karachi to Bombay, around that part. A few places, but. We had relatively little contact or communication with the country itself because we were simply a refugee [INAUDIBLE].

Yeah. And if you stayed there four years, that means that it was the late 1940s before you left, yes?

About that. We left after India changed over and became not part of the English empire but India.

Ah, so when India became independent.

Independent, yeah.

I see. And from there, where did you go?

England. Mother and I went to England. Then Danuta's father and my mother married. And we decided to try out American soil.

How old were you when you came to the United States?

I was college age.

Already college age? So that meant you were in the early 1950s, something like that?

Early '50s.

Early '50s. And where was Danuta born? In Britain?

In Britain.

I see. Is there anything else, Mira, that I have not asked you that you think is important for people to know about your story?

There was an incident about the goats. After work, Mother went to the edge of the camp and cut down those young twigs that just sprout out leaves. And at that time she used to sing. She used to tell me, taught me-- well, I guess a poem. I don't remember the author or whatever, but anyway.

We were playing. The kids were playing hide and seek or something. I was with them. They started to go on the loft. Well, going back to the problem what Mother was doing, making bundles of these twigs to keep the goat, it was essential that you don't shake the bundles because the leaves would fall off and the goats wouldn't get any food. So Mother made me listen very carefully and not allow or talk to the kids not to go and play in the loft.

Well, one time the kids made comments about this and that. And finally, one said, oh, did the ghost -- a ghost, that they heard noises, whatever. And finally, one of them said, oh, if we say a prayer it will be all right.

OK. So they thought they would--

So we started saying a prayer, but the point-- I don't know which prayer it was, but anyway, they started saying a prayer. And I was saying the same prayer, but I was thinking so hard, how am I going to stop all those kids going up there? Finally, I decided not to say a prayer.

Not to say one?

No. Not to say a prayer.

Were you able to keep them from going upstairs to the loft?

Well, he did. [SIGHS]

So Mira, it's OK. Again, this is something you will remember later. That often happens to people.

No, it's a--

You were one or two words behind in the prayer, and they thought it was a ghost. Remember that part of it?

The what?

You were saying the prayer one or two words behind, and they thought it was a ghost. Remember?

Not that one.

No? That's OK. Is there anything else you'd like to add to what we've talked about?

Well, I don't know. You've been very patient with me. But this is a somewhat unfair trial for me.

I can understand that. And I appreciate-- I know that it's taken a lot of strength and energy to talk about. Thank you. Thank you for doing it.

I think what I'll do now is that we'll conclude our interview, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with you, Mira. So this concludes it with Mira Zimmerman on January 23, 2015.

Here we go. We're rolling.

OK. This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Danuta Soletski Urbikas on January 23, 2015. And Danuta, I want you to tell us a little bit about how you are related to Mira and how you have come to know about her story.

So Mira and I have the same mother. My mother met my father in that whole turmoil during World War II, after he was released from the prisoner of war camp, and she and Mira were released from-- or, well, they escaped, actually-- from the labor camp. And it was in Tatischevo near Saratov, where was the First Polish Army camp that was being gathered from all the soldiers that had remained, that hadn't been murdered in the Soviet Union.

So they met there briefly, and they actually met again later on in Jalal-Abad, which was in Uzbekistan. Or I don't know, it's on the borders, near Tashkent. Tashkent was another area where the Polish army had gone. And this was maybe 1,500 miles or more away from Tatischevo, or near Saratov.

OK. So I'd like to first trace-- some of the things that I asked Mira, she didn't remember what the towns were and so on. And tell me, how is it you know of these places?

Well, my mother talked about these experiences the whole time I was growing up. And they were rather in disjointed sequence. So when I had my first child, she agreed to put it all in order with the help of my father. And so we embarked on this project to get it in chronological order, and get the geography right, and the history.

And I started writing a book about it. I did a lot of research and interviewed my parents, mostly my father, and also other historians who were aware of this migration, this whole journey of these people that had been deported.

OK, so I'd like to start from the beginning, at least. But we'll run through it, OK? So Mira was born in Grodno. And that was in what part of Poland?

That, at the time, was Eastern Poland. Today it is Belarus, right on the border, really, with Lithuania and not too far from where the current border of Poland is.

OK. And from Grodno, do you know what deportation they were taken on? Was it the February one?

The February 10, one, yes. In 1940.

OK. And where were they taken to?

They were taken first to a camp across the Urals, which would have been technically Siberia. And I'm trying to remember. One was Mikulinska Do you remember that name? And the other one, I am drawing a blank.

But they were first there for maybe a few months. And this was in winter. And then they were taken back to another camp near Perm, which is a Molotov. And that was where they really were for the duration of their time in the labor camp.

So Perm is a pretty tough place.

Mm-hmm.

Some of the stories that Mira shared with us today, are they ones that you are familiar with, that you had heard about before?

Oh, yes. I grew up with these stories. These were things that were discussed, especially during holiday times or whenever our Polish friends would come over, because many of them had very similar stories. And they would start to talk about all these things. Or just Sunday dinners. This was something that was so large a part of their lives, especially my mother. My father talked about it, but my mother was very-- she went through so much, you know.

If I can repeat a little bit, just to make sure that I'm clear, but she had to work as a lumberjack?

Right. She was fairly tall for a Polish person. Maybe not as tall as I am, but she was-- generally speaking, the Soviets

took people who were working in the country to do the harder jobs because they were honed better. And the people who were in the cities were doing lighter work.

And as Mira was saying, there was no one else to work for them. It was just my mother. And so they came and assessed that she was strong enough, or whatever, to work in the forest. And she would have to go and chop off huge branches of trees that they felled.

And yes, there was one occasion when she-- I don't know. She was so tired by then, and malnourished, and just devastated by the whole experience because, for her, it was a constant worry about saving Mira, that she didn't end up in one of those Soviet orphanages. And so this tree was falling on her, and she just kind of stood there and watched this tree coming towards her. And at the last second, she jumped into a pile of rubble. And the branches from this rubble actually cut--

Broke the fall.

Broke the fall. So she was in there, and they thought-- the Soviets, the brigadier, the supervisor of the work team thought she was trying to kill herself. And so they got mad at her for doing that. And so eventually it actually turned out to be a good thing, because she ended up getting a new job changing the oil on tractors. And also, there was one steam tractor that she had to fill water. And she got paid more for that.

But in the course of all of that, she almost did end up in jail, because she was very patriotic and she would taunt the Soviets, especially the locals, which were typically Ukrainians or Belarusians that were the supervisors in these barracks. And she would sing Polish patriotic songs. And, really, she kind of did things that didn't help her. And that's another thing that happened. When she went to court for this minor incident, it was kind of a vengeance from that particular barracks supervisor that didn't like her.

OK. I wanted to get a sense of how this developed, the context of such a bizarre thing, to be taken to court for having hay.

Actually, there were two court incidences. One was the hay. And then there was another one where she was late for work because she had gone back to get a jacket or something because it was starting to rain. And that one was actually a much more serious one.

But the first time, I think, they docked her for I think a third of her pay, which was just astronomical because she wasn't getting paid very much anyway. It was enough to maybe buy a loaf and a half of bread a day. And so to lose that money, it was really, really difficult.

And did you ever know, or was she ever told why she was deported?

Because she was a landowner.

That's what I thought. That's what I thought.

And also, I think they may have also known that-- they were still married, even though they were separated-- her husband was a soldier. He was a sergeant in the army.

All right. So when it comes to 1941, and there's the agreement between the Polish government in exile and the Soviet Union to release people who had been citizens of Poland who had been deported, they learned about it from a former prisoner rather than officials?

Right. The Soviets were not quick to let go of these free laborers. So it was somebody that had been let go earlier and came back and told them about this. And so my mother tried to get official permission to leave the camp, but they really did not want to give it to her. So, essentially, they escaped.

So tell me this incident that Mira was talking about where she would be a Red Cross nurse and Mira would be left in an orphanage. Was this--

Well, that's much later, actually. That's much later. When my mother and sister escaped from the labor camp, they made their way down the Volga. And this is that incident with the little girl falling and being killed in the steamboat. And they made it to-- now I'm drawing a blank-- I think Krasnovodsk. I think.

Krasnovodsk.

Krasnovodsk. And then they went from there down the Caspian Sea to Pahlevi, right? Or, no. Actually, I'm skipping something. All these people were coming off of these collective farms. Or some of them were sent to collective farms. Some were in labor camps. And there was a huge mass of people. And they didn't know where to put them. So in the southern Soviet Union, they were traveling by train back and forth, trying to find a place to go.

Finally they ended up getting out after that. And in that turmoil, that's when they met my father again. Because getting out of the Soviet Union, already things were much better by then. The British were helping to establish these resettlement camps, and one was in Tehran. And that's where my mother and Mira were there. I'm not sure it was for as long as she says it was, but it was many months.

And my mother studied nursing at that point, in English. And so she did become a Red Cross nurse. And after that, they ended up in India. And they were there, as Mira said, for several years, with my mother being a nurse in the hospital for the orphanage. And Mira went to a convent school that was set up there, again, with British and Polish cooperation.

OK. Now, let me go back to the Soviet Union a little bit. I want to get a sense more of the geography. So from what I understand from your telling me is that the camp they ended up staying in was in Perm, the region of--

Oh, the labor camp, yes.

The labor camp. From there, they escaped and made their way to a river, where they were on a steamboat. And then went down to Krasnovodsk? Is that where they were staying?

They went to Tatischevo.

Tatischevo. And what is Tatischevo?

It's a city or town near Saratov.

I see. OK, in Russia itself.

In Russia, yes.

And it was in Tatischevo that they met your father for the first time?

Right.

And what was his story, in brief? How did he end up there?

Well, he was a reserve officer when the war broke out, so he was called in. And he was almost immediately captured, actually in Lithuania. And then from there, he was sent--

Let me stop right there. Was he in Eastern Poland?

Yes.



OK.

Yes.

And so how did he end up in Lithuania?

They were trying to protect the August<sup>3</sup>w Forest canals from the Germans. Or, no, maybe it was-- I'm not sure now. I think it was-- no, it must have been the Russians that were there. And they got caught and sent to an internment camp in Lithuania. And from there, he was sent to the camp in Kozelsk.

Kozelsk.

Kozelsk. Yeah.

So he was a Russian POW.

Right. He was a Polish POW under the Soviets, excuse me

Right.

And he was not shot?

No, the camp where he was at, there was evidence that these officers were being sent somewhere, but they didn't know where. And he was taken, actually, to-- they were going to build an airstrip or something up further north, in the tundra. And at Grazovietz they were stopped, because at that point Germany had attacked Russia, and so they were camped there for a while. And then, of course, the Polish government agreed-- there was the agreement with the Soviets to form this Polish army.

[POLISH]

Yeah, it was--

Yeah, an amnesty.

--an amnesty. And so then, from there, somehow he made his way towards Tatischevo, or Saratov.

And how is it that he met Mira the first time?

Well, the story that I heard was that she was warming herself at this stove, and my father came over. And he tried to give you some money, some rubles.

Well, no. I was holding a matchbox. Anyway, in that matchbox, Mother gave me four or five rubles, or something like that. And she told me to keep it with me in case I get lost or don't have anything, that I would be able to buy some food.

I see. OK.

And he put some more of his money into the box and gave it to me. And I refused to take it. Mother wouldn't let me take it.

So instead of the rubles, he put some candy in there, remember?

Yeah.

OK, so he put some candy in this little box. And then you came back another time, trying to meet up with him to get

more candy, I think, or something.

I think he and some soldiers bought kids some sugar and some honey.

Yeah. The soldiers always shared their rations with the civilians, especially the children. And then my father, of course, because he had daughters that were the same age, I'm sure he missed them terribly. And so Mira reminded him of them.

And did he talk about these stories as well, and this incident?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, he did. Yeah, he did.

So when he met Mira the first time and so on. And then Mira introduced him to your mother.

Right. Well, as she said, they were in marching in formation for some kind of maneuver, and she saw him and started running up to him. And he broke rank and came over, and met my mother. Our mother.

Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

That's right. And then, after the meeting at Tatischevo, you, Mira, and your mom went further south? Is this it? Or you were on those trains that were going back and forth?

Yeah, that was further south. And it was on those trains where they were trying to find a place for all these refugees coming out of the camps. And that was really, actually worse than the camps because they were under bare skies, and it was cold. By then it was November, December of '41. And there was very little food. And our mother was trying to find food. And there were various incidences that were just very horrifying. It was actually much worse than the camp.

But eventually they made it to a resettlement camp. Actually, my father sent money. I don't know how they managed to stay in mail contact, but our mother asked him for help because they were so destitute. Their luggage was stolen. This is the--

She wrote a letter to the center office of the forming units on some scrap of torn paper. She managed to send that. And it got to your father.

And he sent an incredibly large amount of money, which I'm sure he collected from the other soldiers, of 367--  
300-some.

367's the number I remember. Rubles. And it arrived. And got to my mother and her. This is when they were both sick.

Any money being sent by mail, it was a miracle it got there.

Yeah, it was quite a miracle that that money got-- and that really saved them because at that point my mother had a burlap bag for a dress. And there was no food whatsoever. And they were in some pigsty. I mean, it was just really very hard.

So it sounds like it was almost the first kindness that she had received from all of these experiences.

Well, the one that, of course, stands out the most, yeah.

And then it was after that and they got better that-- from where did they leave the Soviet Union?

So they made it over to-- now I'm losing my train of thought.

Karachi.

No, no, no. That's India. Krasnovodsk. Am I saying that right? And then from there to Pahlevi.

Which is in Iran.

Which is in Iran. And then from there to Tehran. And then when she talks about the steep hills, that's that journey there. And then from Tehran to India.

And how many years difference is there between you?

15.

15? And your parents married where? In what of these many places?

Well, they eventually-- neither one of them was going back to communist Poland, especially since one of the jobs that my father had, he was a Second Lieutenant, an adjutant, and one of his jobs was to weed out communists from the army. And he sent quite a few back.

And his friends that ended up in England, his soldier friends, his officer friends that did go back to Poland disappeared. So the thinking was you don't go back to communist Poland. And of course, my mother and sister knew all about communism, and they weren't going back. So they went to England, and so did my father after he fought in Italy, in Monte Cassino.

He fought in Monte Cassino?

He did. And there was, again, a resettlement camp for soldiers in Hereford. And my sister and mother ended up in Coventry. That's not too far away. And my mother decided to try to find some of the people she had met, he being one of them. And it was the soldiers' daily newspaper or something like that. She put an ad in there, and he answered it.

And at that point, he was in the hospital because he had an accident. And she went to visit him. And the rest is history, and here I am.

[LAUGHTER]

And let us know his name again.

It's Vavjinitz. And Americans translate that to Lawrence, although I'm not sure that's correct.

OK, Vavjinitz?

Vavjinitz Soletski.

Soletski. And when you talked about him rooting out, looking for communists in the military, that is, trying to find them, does this mean the reformed military that was part of the Soviet Union within the Soviet Union and then left?

Right. He was with Anders, with Wladyslaw Anders, the general in the 2nd Corps, 5th Division.

And so that was one of his duties.

Yeah.

OK. Well, thank you very, very much, Danuta. We appreciate you participating and expanding on Mira's remarkable

story. Thank you to both of you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

So this concludes our interview, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Danuta Soletski Urbikas.