

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Interview with Mira Zimmerman
January 23, 2015
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PREFACE

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MIRA ZIMMERMAN
January 23, 2015

Question: Good morning. This is a **United States** Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mrs. **Mira** – Miss **Mira Zimmerman**, on January 23rd, 2015, in **Chicago, Illinois**. Thank you very much, **Mira**, for agreeing to speak with us today about your early experiences, 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?

Answer: What was?

Q: Your name –

A: My na –

Q: – when you were born, mm-hm.

A: I don't understand what –

Q: Could you tell me your name?

A: My name was **Mira Zimmerman** – **Mira** – **Mirosława(ph) Zimmerman** actually, because that's the official name.

Q: That's exactly what I wanted, **Mirosława(ph)** – **Mira Mirosława(ph) Zimmerman**.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: And what was the date of your birth?

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A: My – 1934 – 1934

Q: So that would be September 19th, 1934?

A: That's right.

Q: Okay. And where were you born?

A: **Grodno**.

Q: **Grodno** –

A: **Poland**.

Q: Uh-huh. What is **Grodno**? Is it a town, or a village?

A: It's – it's a town on the river **Neman**.

Q: On the river **Neman**? And where is it –

A: The river **Neman** is – go-goes into **Baltic**.

Q: So, what part of **Poland** is this in? Is it the north, the south, the west?

A: Well, it – it was the ea-east.

Q: The east.

A: Th-The Russian side –

Q: I see. Okay.

A: – of **Poland**, prior to the outbreak of the second war.

Q: Okay. So it was – **Grodno**, it is part of **Poland**.

A: **Grodno** is – is **Poland**, but of course, it has been really moved, **Russia**.

Q: Uh-huh, now. You mean today it's part of **Russia** –

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A: Or –

Q: – or **Belarus**?

A: – that – that – well, up to **Yel**ta(ph) th-they divided it, shifted it the –

Q: I see, they shifted it.

A: I – shifting the borderline sometimes is confusing.

Q: 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.

A: Yeah.

Q: Depending on how the borders shifted. Tell me, do you have any memories of **Grodno**?

A: I?

Q: Do you remember what **Grodno** looked like?

A: Oh, no. I remember I was taken to a movie, first time in my life, and I created so much [**indecipherable**] everybody else was laughing.

Q: Really?

A: Was a **Shirley Temple** movie.

Q: Really? It wa – and you remember that it was a **Shirley Temple** movie.

A: I – well, that wa – you admir – you have to remember, I didn't have video games and other things, so that was a big thing. But –

Q: So what kind of a fuss did you create?

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A: Hm?

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

A: Well nothing, til someth – something about oh, rish – a **Shirley Temple** movie, and **Walt Disney's "Snow White."** She is running, she is running, she is –

Q: So you were saying that?

A: Oh, I was yelling on top of my voice supposedly, which could be annoying, but it could be amusing.

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

A: The – the – the year that I was born?

Q: Mm-hm. What was the year? I forgot.

A: 1934.

Q: 1934, okay. Your mother, what was her name, her first name?

A: **Janina**(ph).

Q: And her maiden name?

A: **Szlarinska**(ph).

Q: **Szlazinska**(ph), yeah? And your father's name?

A: **Rudolf**(ph) **Zimmerman**.

Q: That's not a very Polish name, **Zimmerman**.

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A: Well no, and I know very little, but my father and I hardly knew each other.

Q: Did you – do you have any memory –

A: That's the way the war turned out.

Q: I see. Do you have any memories of him?

A: Very little. We managed to communicate after the wa – second war a little, but my parents were in the process of diso – divorce, anyway.

Q: When you were little?

A: Hm?

Q: They – were they in the process of divorce before the war?

A: Well, that's what I had been told.

Q: I see.

A: Those things were too – too – let's say serious matters to be discussed with the child that's five or six.

Q: Yeah.

A: And I don't know too much, and later on things just were different. We were – mother and I were in refugee concentration camps, being shifted here and there, and –

Q: He was not with you?

A: He was not with us.

Q: I see. Before we get to those parts of your story –

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A: Hm?

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

A: My very first –

Q: First years.

A: Where?

Q: In **Grodno**.

A: Oh, in **Grodno**.

Q: So –

A: Well, how could I tell you very much?

Q: Well, I'll ask some questions.

A: Oh, okay.

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

A: Well, that was th-the property that my mother inherited, and she – she was in the process of starting a berry and fruit gardens.

Q: Oh really? What kind of – tell me a little bit about your mother's family. Your grandparents and the larger family. What kind – did they – were they well-to-do?

A: I can tell you only that I had a picture in my mind of a family portrait of my mother, a very stately, white collar laces, and very po – but that's was – that what I

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[**indecipherable**] 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.

Q: Really? And you have no memory of her?

A: No.

Q: Okay.

A: Just that photograph.

Q: Okay. What kind of a place did you live in? Was it a large apartment, or a house?

A: The house was in a country where the – mother's property was. That was outside **Grodno**.

Q: Was it – did it have a lot of land?

A: She didn't have a lot of land, you know, ma – eight – maybe 80 acres or something.

Q: Eighty acres?

A: Something – something not – not very big, but she – I think she – she was the one that directed the arrangement for the g-gardens, and –

Q: Okay.

A: It was still the sa – somewhat in the process of being formed, anyway, at that time, and this is – here is the beginning of the war, too.

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Q: Yeah. But 80 acres, if we're talking about eight-zero, that's a lot of acreage.

A: Well, I – I don't know exactly hectares, and –

Q: Ah, do you remember how many hectares?

A: No, I don't remember.

Q: Okay.

A: But I think it's listed somewhere. I don't remember exactly.

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

A: Oh, this was the la – the la – that property was given by the government because of mother's brother be – taking part in a Polish ri – let's see, the rise of that territory, because remember, **Poland** was divided be-before that.

Q: And divided in what way?

A: Well, div-divided de-depending which – how shall I say? Which – there is a Polish word, and an English word, and I can't – **Poland** was divided –

Q: It was partitioned?

A: – by its borders. Borders were shifted.

Q: I see.

A: Into – depending on which was – which was Austrian, which was Russian, German.

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Q: And you were – **Grodno** was in which part of the – part te – part of the territory, of those three places?

A: As far as I know, on the – it was Russian.

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

A: Well, he – he wa – he de-deserved some compensation from the government, because he put – he was in that category of helping the – those that fought for the liberation of **Poland**.

Q: Thank you. That's what 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?

A: Yeah, mm-hm.

Q: Okay. Okay. And so the land was then given to him.

A: Well, th-the land could – given to the mother's parents. After they passed away, they simply – he, and the brother died –

Q: I see.

A: And mother was the owner.

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

A: The all – sh – there was a sister also, that she also died.

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Q: I see. Do you remember their names?

A: The – the brother was **Valenti**(ph), and – well, that's what Mother told me, **Valenti**(ph), and the sister was **Natalia**(ph).

Q: 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?

A: Well, she – are you asking me if they were planning to – to – to start the business together?

Q: No, no. I am asking if you have any memories of what the land looked like.

A: Oh.

Q: That's what I want to know. Did you ever go and play there, did you walk there?

A: No, no.

Q: No.

A: Nothing, nothing. You have to keep on remembering that '39, what the second World War, I was merely probably around five-ish.

Q: Five years old?

A: Six.

Q: Yeah.

A: Child memories.

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Q: I know.

A: Don't – I really recall almost nothing.

Q: I know, I know. The – sometimes there's one episode, or another episode.

A: I – I remember one thing about my father and her – before the war. Once he came in late, and he brought in a gift for me.

Q: Really?

A: It was a dog.

Q: A dog?

A: Like a **Dobermeyer**(ph), but very small. He could put it in his pocket.

Q: Really?

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

Q: What was the dog's name?

A: The dog's name was **Figa**(ph).

Q: **Figa**(ph).

A: **Fig. Fig.**

Q: That's sweet. That's very sweet.

A: Because he could fit it into his pocket, he was so small.

Q: That must have been quite a present.

A: Well, it wasn't the fact that it was a present, but it was the – the – the gift to itself.

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Q: Yeah.

A: And that was – I – I tried to keep that kind of a – that memory of my father, that's all.

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

A: Oh, I remember that because later we s-sort of met in **England**.

Q: After the war?

A: After the war.

Q: Okay. So tell me, what –

A: After the war, we're – he was in a hospital in – i-in **Scotland**, I think, for one, and then **England**. He rented, or he boarded, I should say, with an English family. And when we da – 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 we – the Russians would send us back to **Siberia**.

Q: Okay.

A: So Mother and I were brought to **England**, and –

Q: Okay. I – we'll get – 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 –

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A: He was the average height. I don't have any photographs, if that's what you're talking about, prior to second World War, because anything that was there, it was stolen, or ravaged, or –

Q: Yeah. And your mother, tell me a little bit about your mother before the war.

A: She was very energetic. She took – tried to get the – those gardens started. My father didn't help any, he was – he had the problem.

Q: Okay. Okay. Did you have – did – when World War II started, it was when **Germany** invaded **Poland** on September 1st, 1939.

A: Mm.

Q: Did your parents talk about that? Do you remember hearing the adults talking about the war starting?

A: About the what problem?

Q: Th-The war, the World War starting.

A: The war prob – I don't remember anything. I was too small to – to – to even eva – even if I'd heard anything – discussion –

Q: I understand.

A: – to paid attention to anything like that.

Q: Do you remember foreign soldiers in **Grodno**, or in your home?

A: Well, I remember when the – the Russians armies entered to the territory. There were a lot of sabotage and we had to dodge the bu-bullets in **Grodno**.

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Q: Oh, so you were in **Grodno**, and you were – and there was shooting going on in town?

A: The what?

Q: There was shooting, so that you had to dodge bullets?

A: There were –

Q: You – you're saying there was a lot – people had to dodge bullets in **Grodno**?

A: Yeah, well, my mother had the infection of some sort. She – I don't know why – why she got 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 o – in the process of crossing parts of **Grodno**, you had watch out, as I said, dod the – dodge the bullets. There were wou – they were – they were still fighting, certain sections.

Q: I see.

A: It was very frightening, but other than that I can't tell you, other than when it settled down and – and supposedly law and order was established all over again, and the Russian sys – system –

Q: Was implemented? You know, was –

A: 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 – to live. We were robbed. The house –

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Q: So while you had been –

A: – the house was torn apart. There was – there was nothing that we didn't –
Mother didn't have a pot to – to cook in.

Q: Who did that?

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

Q: Who did the robbing?

A: Well, th-the **[indecipherable]** the partisans, when the – the law cha-changed
from Polish to Russian, then back to – to Polish. I-It – it was su – su – somewhat
frightening, but we had very little that we could take with us, when they took us to
Siberia. They were –

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

A: The what?

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

A: Well, there were partisans ravaging the country. But our partisans were a
Russian **[indecipherable]** whatever, and – and they were also German
[indecipherable]. And they ravaged the country.

Q: I see. I see.

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

Q: I see. So he had to report to his military unit. He – he was not there?

A: No.

Q: He was not there.

A: No, he wasn't there.

Q: So do you remember the night, or the day that you were deported to **Siberia**?

A: The night, well, the – you heard the thud of the horses running, circling the house. And then the dog started yapping.

Q: **Figa**?

A: And in Russian the [**indecipherable**] get up and get dressed.

Q: Who was at home, just you and your mother?

A: Just you and me, or – and my mother.

Q: That must have been terrifying.

A: The what?

Q: It must have been terrifying.

A: Sar –

Q: Scary. It must have been very frightening.

A: Oh, it mu – mu – scary. It was. But I was confident cause my mother was there.

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Q: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So what – what happened? Did they come into the house?

You said they were circling and you heard the hooves?

A: No, they did not circle, the – the – they're going in, barged in. The few items that we still had were put on the sleigh, and we were marched off to the railway station.

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

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

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

A: Well, that's – you can ask. And I – I never had any explanation that was logical.

Q: So you didn't know.

A: We didn't – 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 – the Russian command decided that they wanted additional thing, they wanted our labor force.

Q: Well, one of the reasons I asked about the land earlier, is that sometimes –

A: The mark?

Q: About your land, how much land your mother had.

A: Oh, that. We did-didn't have much land, it was just like a small farm.

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Q: Sometimes the people who were deported, were those who had land.

A: Well, th – th – there were, of course, some people that they – that – that did have, but we didn't.

Q: I see.

A: Or, Mother didn't.

Q: So, did your father find out what happened to you?

A: We didn't hear from him.

Q: Do you – was he deported eventually too, or does he – you – the next time you see him, he's in **England**. Was he arrested by anybody?

A: In **Poland**?

Q: Your father, yes.

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

Q: Oh, so when – when they came to get you –

A: To same – to the same camp by the Russians, but when the war ended, or we, in the – during the time that the –

Q: 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 –

A: Yeah.

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Q: – were you alone with your mother and nobody else?

A: Nobody else.

Q: So where your – your father was gone?

A: Well, your father – my father was called to the army, and nobody could – could get communication from, because there was a break in communication

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

A: Well, that was in **Siberia**.

Q: So what happened to him? How did he get to **Siberia**?

A: Well, the-they – they kee – when the – when the – after **Yelta**, he was – well, the men who are called, they could join Polish units that were being formed to help **Stalin** [indecipherable]

Q: That was in – yes, that's in 1941.

A: Yeah, that's right.

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

A: At that point, what he was first ta – arrested by the Russians, but then the Polish units were formed, and supposedly we lost con – total contact with him.

Q: I see. I see. I see. Okay.

A: He was [indecipherable] he had to be in one of the units that were being formed to help **Stalin** at **Yelta**.

Q: **Yelta** is in 1945. That's – the **Yelta** Agreement is after the war.

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A: Well, this was –

Q: Can we break for a second please? **[break]**

A: What happened then, I don't know.

A2: Okay, so when she was arrested, it was my – they were separated, her parents.

A: There was –

Q: Correct.

A2: So they were not together when they – she – they were arrested. Somehow he ended up – he was a soldier too, with that same – that her uncle – our uncle was fighting in. So he also – he would have been arrested for being a soldier in – in the **Pilsudski's** army, essentially. And – and then, when he got to the labor camp, they were – 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 – he got in – he went to prison, and then when **Hitler** attacked **Russia**, they were – he was let go, just like my father was let go, and into that Polish army. So she doesn't really know how he got to the labor camp.

Q: Yeah, that – but I was confused because he was with them you say, in the labor camp –

A2: Mm-hm, for a very short –

Q: – and yet, he wasn't with them – yeah, he wasn't with them –

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A2: – for a very short time, but he wasn't like in the same accommodation, it – he – he di – he – they – they were separated.

Q: They were separate. Okay, fine. Okay, so let's go back to the moments, and the – then the night where – 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.

A: Yeah.

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

A: Well, you – they stuff you in a shelf-type wagons that they transport cattle in, and – and take you to Siberian wasteland.

Q: But you didn't – did you know that at the time? Did anybody tell you where you were going?

A: No. You don't get to – any kind of information, just to **[indecipherable]** did you ever see the film, "**Dr. Zhivago**?"

Q: Yes.

A: Well, that – th-that scene when they were cleaning the debris from the thing, that was routine thing for the transportation.

Q: I can't imagine, as a five year old child, what – what kind of a feeling you had. Were – weren't you terrified?

A: What kind of what?

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

A: Of course. I mean, th-the child, it doesn't translate to them the same tune, it seems. The child – I could hold my mother's hand, so that was a reassuring. But other than that, no.

Q: Were there other children on the train?

A: The wagons were packed, the whole train was like that.

Q: Do you remember anything about the journey?

A: The what?

Q: About the time you were on the track – on the train, on those cattle cars.

A: Do I – do I remember what?

Q: The journey. The – the moments, the days you were on the train. What it looked like.

A: The Germans?

Q: The journey. The jour – the trip. When you were on that train, how – you know, you were there for a while, yes?

A: Well, the – it – it's – the train took a while, but the – did I remember what was that que –

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

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A: Well, as I pointed out, that scene in “**Dr. Zhivago**,” with the – that prisoner being shackled and throw a – cleaning the debris off.

Q: The debris, mm-hm.

A: But other than that, it – we didn’t really [**indecipherable**] very much. There was a – this place that once we get part of the road, we had to go by sleighs. And it was a very stormy night, and we had – Mother had problem trying to keep me alive, because the – the sleigh kept turning over. It was very difficult for her. The driver di – wa – didn’t – couldn’t see very well. So Mother had to help out. But they di – got us to a place where they gave us some hot, washed down soup. But it was hot, so they gave us that.

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

A: Nothing.

Q: How did you feed yourself?

A: So people – people had some supplies. Those that had it, got fed, and those that didn’t, had problem.

Q: Did anybody die on the way?

A: I don’t remember.

Q: Okay. Okay. Do you remember the – the name of the place you were taken to?

A: No.

Q: Do you remember what it looked like?

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

Q: 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?

A: Deported?

Q: Taken from your home. Were you – was that wintertime?

A: But who we talking about?

Q: Yourself and your mother.

A: My – we were there in the wintertime.

Q: Okay.

A: All the time.

Q: 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?

A: What? I can't – can't –

Q: Can we stop please? **[break]** So, people in the cattle cars, nobody fed them. If they had food with them, they were okay, if they didn't have anything, they had problems.

A: Yeah, well, I think they – they used the water that cooled the engines in the locomotives to make some broth or something like that, I think. So that was a part

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of the, quote, food that we had. But in – in the wagon – in the cattle cars, there really wasn't very much assistance, except guards to make sure that you stayed with the train, and –

Q: Were they – would they shoot people? Did they shoot people if they tried to run away?

A: I don't think anybody tried to, but –

Q: Okay.

A: – they just had – th-there was a – 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 – and someone started singing one of the prayer songs.

Q: So, when you were leaving **Poland**. When you were leaving **Poland** –

A: Mm-hm.

Q: – and you were passing the border.

A: Yeah.

Q: People realized it.

A: Well, it was a very moving moment, but –

Q: Yeah. Yeah. When you got to where you had to – where they took you, you were then taken by sleigh, and the sleigh kept overturning?

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A: Well, it – the sleigh – th-the – this – the – they had – that territory had very bad snowstorm, and we were right in the middle of it. But we had a – some kind of soup, I think, to – we were fed, a little. Other than that, I don't remember.

Q: 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?

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

Q: And w – did – was it a huge place, and did you – was it a big place with lots of people in it?

A: No, it wasn't particularly lar – big place. Just a few barracks.

Q: And you s – and then th – that's where you had to live, was in those barracks?

Is that where you ended up living, in those barracks?

A: Ah, yeah.

Q: Yeah.

A: More or less. I don't remember what was in between that –

Q: Were they heated?

A: The what?

Q: Was the – was there heat in those barracks? Was it warm inside?

A: Well, there's plenty of wood, so you had to make your own wood.

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Q: Your own fire? Did people make their own fire, inside the barracks?

A: Yeah, I think you could use the facility that they had – th-there were two camps that they m-moved us to, Mother and I, but I don't remember very much about the – one of. I just remember that they – Mother had to work very hard as a lumberjack.

Q: She was a lumberjack?

A: I remember that.

Q: Did you go with her when she worked? Did you go with her when she was –

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

Q: It – it sounds – are you – all right, let's pause. **[break]** So your mother – I – your mother must have had an un – incredible hard life there.

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

Q: Did anybody help you?

A: No – no. There was a – one incident, I had the be – some kind of an infection, or – on the foot, and they send me to the **felcher**(ph) – doctor in camp. It's a – that just stayed with the kids that were – if the husband was with the family, they

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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 they – when the – 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 –

Q: Crazy.

A: – you couldn't even buy things.

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

A: No, no, very little – distances were considerable, th – for one things, and secondly, you didn't have any maps, or whatever, and so that was th – that territory was wild.

Q: Were there any local people that you met there?

A: No.

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

A: And the guards, yeah, something on that order.

Q: Was – was there a fence around the camp? Was it like a prison?

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

Q: So you were in the middle of nowhere.

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A: Although I think some section of – did have a ga – a barbed wire, but I don't remember too much.

Q: Is this the place you stayed for a long time?

A: Well, the longest time that the camps were in operation supposedly, the beginning of the second war, and when the **Yelta** release started pouring –

Q: You mean – hang on just a second.

A: – started for – forming – **[break]** – **yelt** – **Yelta** directed, or released several thousand prisoners be – that they were supposedly ready to form units to help **Stalin** fight inter – **Hitler**.

Q: I'm a little confused. I'm a little confused.

A: Yeah.

Q: Because I reme – 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**.

A: Yeah, yeah, well –

Q: Was that it?

A: That's it.

Q: That's it. And then that's why these units were formed.

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

Q: How – how did you find out about it?

A: Well, it's a – someone managed to get out of prison and work himself back to the camp, and tell us about it. Although the Russians were supposedly – supposed to inform us, they didn't.

Q: They didn't. I see.

A: They – we found out, or at least I was told that they – the residents of the camp found out, when this guy came in from prison, after he was released.

Q: I see. So how did – did people then – let's say they've known now that they can leave, but the – the guards don't let them? Did they let them leave when they found out, or did they still say no, you can't?

A: Well no, you didn't say anything, I mean, they only – they'll had to admit that you can leave – go, and try and draw in some of those forming units, but then nothing was certain. Mother and I – Mother decided to try and draw in those units. She said – she told them she would give me to a **pryude**(ph), which is like an orphanage, that she will give me to the orphanage, and she would join as a nurse.

Q: Okay.

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A: That worked fine, and she had the permit that that – she could do so, but the commandant left the – for some business or something, and then the next commandant didn't know about the release Mother had, and the – th-they said – the – the assistant wouldn't okay it. So Mother decided to join the car – th-the sleigh that took the men to join one of the units nearby.

Q: Okay.

A: And somehow it was difficult for her to get few pieces together and join the – the sleigh as it left the camp.

Q: So this was –

A: We – we walked – we walked past the commandant, but Mother didn't have the permit to – to leave the camp –

Q: So this is –

A: – any longer. So we is – we ran away.

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

A: Yes, it is.

Q: In those bark – in those barracks?

A: It is.

Q: And you ran away from there?

A: Well, we ran away because that was there – that was a way to – to, quote, freedom.

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Q: But how did you know where to go?

A: We went with the cart, that's why we – the man sta – stopped the ga – th-the – the horse, this – for a while, at – s-some other mother mad – made – Mother and I made our way to the – to get a ride from them. Once they had the ride from them, we stopped by the riverboat.

Q: Was this in summertime? Was this in summer, or was it in winter?

A: Oh, in the winter.

Q: Oh, so you ran away from – from the camp in winter?

A: In winter.

Q: Uh-huh. And were these men who stopped the wagon, were they Polish men who were on their way to join the units?

A: Well, th-these were Polish soldiers, so – with families, the farmers of the area.

Q: Okay. Okay.

A: They saw Mother was trying very hard to s – to spare me, and def – try to keep herself still in reasonable condition.

Q: Did you get sick when you were in the camp?

A: Did I?

Q: Get sick, when you were in this camp?

A: In the camp, no, but later on in the – the south of **Russia**, that's when a lot of sickness started.

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Q: Okay. And your mother, did she stay – did she get sick in the camp, or did she stay healthy?

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

Q: What – can you tell me a little bit about those situations?

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

Q: That's horrible. That sounds – that sounds like –

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

Q: I can't imagine what it was like for her. I said, I can't imagine what it was like for her.

A: Yeah.

Q: And for you. And for you.

A: Well, it – it was difficult. It was difficult for Mother. And there – there were other families, but – but if the man could work, then it helped the woman, but

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those that didn't have the man, or – or those who man – other members of the family were in a – in prison, let's say, it still – it was prison within the prison, it seems.

Q: What did you do when she was at work?

A: The what?

Q: What did – what happened to you when she was out working?

A: Oh, when she was out working, I was with the other kids in the camp.

Q: Was there a school?

A: I-I-In what – I remember there was some school, but the – that time that the weather was warm.

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

A: Did I what?

Q: Did you find playmates?

A: Did?

Q: Were there other people for you – children for you to play with?

A: Yeah. I – we – we played like children's games.

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

A: That sometime – oh, my mother bought a goat.

Q: She bought a goat?

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

Q: Did it help?

A: She bought a goat – well, the – the goat gave half a glass of milk, that was my –

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

A: Yeah, they knew.

Q: So she had to –

A: If you – if you could feed the goat, then that's what –

Q: Well, that's my next question, she had to feed not only you, but also the goat.

A: Yeah.

Q: How did she do that?

A: She made – she told me to go in the – along the road to – to pick up some hay.

Q: And were you allowed to do that?

A: Well, I was picking it up, that – that which we – fell on the ground, so I could do it, but they – at one time they – they said that Mother was responsible for me – my stealing the goat.

Q: Stealing the goat, or the hay?

A: Stealing the ha-hay. And they sent her to – in the courts. She had to walk for several miles, I think, to the di – court station.

Q: Where she – where you were accused of having stolen hay?

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

Q: What happened?

A: Well, nothing, the – the – the – the commandant assistant that took part in that part, at that particular project, didn't – I told the judge that he would not take responsibility of Mother's negligence, the – supposedly, at the same time, Mother had a little mishap, unfortunate accident, when a tree 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 tripped – she froze, she couldn't move.

Q: The tree fell on her?

A: She met – she must – of course she did. She must have [indecipherable] you know how it is when you are scared of something, whatever. And she fell between the piled up branches, and the branches saved her.

Q: I see. I see.

A: So she did it – the tree sort of was propped by other trunks.

Q: So she was saved, but she was stuck?

A: Was sure, well – they helped her out after everything settled down, but it was a little difficult.

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

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

Q: So she would –

A: The what?

Q: Did she – did she get tobacco as a ration?

A: Well, this – this – she couldn't buy tobacco –

Q: Okay.

A: – at the store. But she could also then take the tobacco to one of the villages that stop by, and they would give her potatoes or, I think – and I think it was mostly potatoes. I don't know if there was –

Q: So food. She would get food for the tobacco.

A: Well, that was the – the way to get some food. **[break]**

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

A: Oh, to keep clean, the blankets or the clothing, we had to boil ashes with – in water, and it di-disinfected the thing that way.

Q: You mean, you would put the blankets in the water, and the – and ashes –

A: With the – yeah, with the ashes, the ashes, the wood ashes.

Q: Wha – what would the ashes do?

A: Well, they – they disinfect it mostly.

Q: Really? I never knew that.

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A: Well, that's what we were told. I didn't know any other way. The – there was also another method of it – we tried to fake out, or in somehow – but I – I don't remember how they did it, but the barracks were infested with field lice.

Q: With field lice, okay.

A: And th-that was very annoying, what it – I don't know if you are familiar what I'm talking about.

Q: No.

A: But they smell quite a-atrocious, and they – well, they – they are like lice. Like – like –

Q: Were you able to – was there – were there bathing facilities? Was there a place to take a shower?

A: They – they – no, no, no bathing, you had to take care of yourself. But from time to time, someone like got a [**indecipherable**] problem, they got a problem with some medical issue, and sometimes they would just send them to the camp doctor – doctor, but there was nothing else.

Q: Now, I want to ask you about when your mother got in trouble for the hay that was – was for the goat.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: Did you actually take hay that you shouldn't have, or was it somebody accused you of it?

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A: No, I did – I – this was something that dripped from the cart.

Q: And so it was perfectly okay?

A: And it-t-t – it was okay.

Q: And somebody then just accused her anyway, of taking hay she shouldn't have?

A: Well, they – the – the – they wanted, I think to take advantage of Mother's strength, and make her work a little bit harder.

Q: Okay. Okay. Did she get a punishment for it?

A: Well, I – I think she – she was – she didn't get the full salary that – that, quote, she earned.

Q: I see. I see. What happened to your little dog **Figa**?

A: Oh, he got a – at the last minute, as the sleigh was about to start for the railway station, **Figa** jumped into the snow and disappeared.

Q: Oh, so you had been taking her with you?

A: We – we were sort of planning to, cause that was my one thing that I treasured.

Q: Did you make friends with other people in that camp?

A: Well, yeah, of course we did. [**indecipherable**] as much she had the – there was time for any, quote friendly relations. But if they had husbands with them, they sort of supplied some nourishment to the situation.

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Q: Yeah. And 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?

A: Oh no, it was being the same as in camp. There was – you couldn't trust the Russian authorities, whatever. There were kids that were picked up by the railway stations and the other places, that spoke maybe Polish, but they – once they were taken to the orphanages, they disappeared from existence.

Q: So it was not to a Soviet orphanage she would have gone – she would have left you.

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

Q: Okay. Okay. I think we should break here. **[break]**

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Q: This is a continuation of the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with **Mira Zimmerman**, on January 23rd, 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, as first finds – 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 do you remem – can you tell me a little bit about –

A: The riverboat, yeah.

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

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

Q: She was just left there to drown?

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

Q: Oh my. Oh my. Did you see this?

A: My mother to – covered my eyes, didn't want me to look at – tried to distract me.

Q: Was the boat full of people?

A: Yeah, it was packed.

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

A: The – th-the – th-the – the Russians were running the boat.

Q: Okay. So the Soviets were – were in charge of transporting you?

A: Well, this was a way of transporting to the – through the waterway traffic.

Q: And where did they take you?

A: Hm?

Q: Where did they take you?

A: Oh, th-this was – they were – they were simply trying to get to the centers of the formation of – of this new, quote, addition to the Russian army.

Q: Mm-hm. And – the Russian army?

A: Well –

Q: Or the Polish army?

A: These – the Polish army, but it was in **Russia**, and under Russian jurisdiction.

Q: Okay. Where did you land? Where did you finally end up?

A: Well, I remember having to wait for several hours, and I was go – got very scared. I was all alone. Th-the – the individuals from that labor camp had to register to do – fill out some papers, and it took quite a few hours to get that – to do that s-signing up, and to – to come back. I was scared that I would be left alone, that Mother was arrested. It was somewhat frightening thing, because I – I was by

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myself. But before, there were other people around, but at that point, th – the people left, and they – those that were from our labor camp were trying to get those papers com – signed up and cleared.

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

A: The – I – we were on the dock.

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

A: Oh, no, I don't remember.

Q: Okay. Did your mother return? Did your mother return?

A: Oh, course, Mother returned and she bought si – I guess they had some money allotted to the ki – those from our boat [indecipherable] the – Mother bought a doll for me.

Q: Really?

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

Q: And she bought it for you there?

A: At the onset. Anyway, Mother bought a doll at that place, and that – and that doll unfortunately, didn't last very long. Someone stole it from me. It didn't really mean very much, but well, that's all mo – Mother could do – use to distract me and – not to be scared, or something.

Q: Where did you go from there?

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A: Well, that was another place, I don't remember th – the sequence now any more, but it was another place that collected, you might say, units for that formation of that army. And that was –

Q: Mm-hm. And so that means you were amongst Polish military people?

A: Pol – military people, mostly Polish. That what we had to deal with from then on, for some time, simply bec – after finding out that we could leave th-the Russian free labor camps jurisdiction, then we could – we still needed assistance, so the army units were open, fed some of the civilians. We got some food that way.

Q: Oh, I see. So the Polish army units were feeding some –

A: They started – they started these refugee camp centers.

Q: Were you – how were you housed? Were you living in barracks again?

A: In barracks, or we – th-the local housing that was available, some of them had, you know, specially the [indecipherable] then – that they had kibidszkys(ph), mud huts, with the mud.

Q: Did you live in that, in those?

A: We did.

Q: I see. By this point, was it still wintertime, or was it already warmer?

A: Well, it was still wa – cold.

Q: Did you get sick –

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A: Mother and s-some man got together and, quote, robbed a – a storage of white beets.

Q: White beets?

A: The white beets, which are really sugar beets. A-And those white beets were so delicious when they were roasted in a – in a campfire.

Q: Oh, really? Yeah.

A: Yeah. But anyway, Mother and actually the – the man call – talked my mother into being brave enough, and my God, Mother was brave, she – she didn't need talking into, but anyway, Mother decided to join them on that excursion of ge – helping ourselves from some – beets were stored, I think before the army, or something like that. Bec – just to store it, sucked up beets, because

[indecipherable]

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

A: We were hungry. We were fed the beginning by – by some – I guess these were **[indecipherable]** or no, that's my – maybe that was a little later, but at one point in our journey going south i-in **Russia**, we would get **lepierszki**(ph).

Lepierszki(ph) was something like a deep dish pizza.

Q: Really? Uh-huh, with – with tomatoes?

A: But it wasn't – it wasn't filled with any, it was just a loaf like that.

Q: I see.

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A: And they eat it with li – I don't know that th-they have had something that they – they were eating it with, but they gave some to – to the prisoners.

Q: But you weren't prisoners any more.

A: No, we weren't prisoners, I don't know how to distinguish them to the – to the –

Q: Refugees?

A: To the refugees.

Q: Okay.

A: Well –

Q: Is this like a flatbread that you're talking about, it was a flat bread?

A: It's not flat. It was something like a – a bread that's thick, but it was a-around, it was in a – in a round form.

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

A: That's right. First of all, th – someone caught something that registered very high temperatures. And she wa – she was taken to the hospital. This was in a, quote, mud house, in a **kibidka**(ph). And they were taken to the hospital, which was several miles away, but you could get some assistance. And they – the individual, after some time, came back and at that point, two other people and myself caught – had the – it was typhus, or something.

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Q: Ah.

A: It was the rather serious problem, and anyway, the – Mother suffered quite a bit.

Q: Did she catch it?

A: She – she didn't – she didn't have anything to – to give me, or to – to ca – 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 to – I g – at that hospital, they – like 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 work most of the time. So – but I managed to get out.

Q: So you – you got better.

A: After later on, Mother got it.

Q: Really?

A: So now we had the same problem.

Q: Did – was this in the area where the Polish military units were being formed?

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

Q: Do you remember anything about the journey?

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A: Germans?

Q: No, no, no, the – the trip on the boat.

A: Oh, to 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.

Q: Oh really?

A: There was a sudden warnings and re – regarding – warning of the danger, or – to wear ja – lifejackets, because the boat might be bombed, just like the – the other.

Q: So you had to wear those lifejackets, mm-hm.

A: [**indecipherable**] sticking out from the water.

Q: How were you able to get on these transports?

A: Out of what?

Q: How were you able to leave **Russia**, and the sov – well, not **Russia**, but the **Soviet Union**? How are you able to leave there, because neither you nor your mother were military people.

A: Well –

Q: How were they – how were you accepted to go?

A: Well, that just – that – they – they made arrangements, once the – the people got to the southern point, they made arrangements to get to **Persia**, and then to

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some other **Mediterranean** – near **Mediterranean** area – points. Some of my friends, for instance, were in **Libya**, and –

Q: Oh really? From **Russia**?

A: Yeah.

Q: Directly from **Russia**, uh-huh. Or directly from the **Soviet Union**, I should say.

A: Well, directly from the **Soviet Union**.

Q: Do you remember much about that boat trip, besides the sa –

A: The what?

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

A: Boat trip? Which boat trip you talking about?

Q: The one going from the so –

A: On the river? On the –

Q: No, going from the **Soviet Union** to **Persia**.

A: Oh that. Well, I know that per – prior to – to getting to **Persia**, I had to walk a stretch of si – I don't know, two sa – se-several miles, but I don't remember how much. But I remember it from the fact that my shoes were stolen. We had to walk on sand, and this was very hot sand. And I suffered something ou – terrible. I would step a few steps and Mother had to put something on the ground so I could cool my feet.

Q: Oh dear. So it took a long time?

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A: Well, it took a long time.

Q: The – it seems that people were doing a lot of stealing. You –

A: Well –

Q: – lost a lot of things.

A: Well, yi – they helped themselves as they, quote, saw fit.

Q: Yeah. You know, your doll was stolen, your shoes were stolen.

A: Well, I missed a family photograph that was stolen.

Q: 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**?

A: Well, my mother became a Red Cross nurse. She had – that was a – in **Persia**, and that helped us a little, but otherwise it was difficult. We didn't have very much. On our journey from this northern part to – to southern territory in **Russia**, I – I – **[indecipherable]** her job, but those places – we had ... oh, I can't –

Q: Excuse me?

A: No. I was going to try and recall how **Danuta's** father and mother mer – it was one of those col-colle-collective centers, it was forming th-the nad – a new addition to – to – to the Russian's armies.

Q: The Russian, or the Polish army?

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A: The Polish army, but the Russian directors are right there. Anyway, the Polish army. He was taking his unit for exercise, and I recognized him, that it was him, and –

Q: How did you – what was this person you're talking about?

A: That's was the – it was – at – anyway, he was just taking his unit for exercise there, and I recognize him and run up to him, and Mother, Mother, this is – I forget **[indecipherable]** what he told me to call him. But we made friends one time, I was warming myself near some kind of a stove, and that's how we met.

Q: And how –

A: And then –

Q: And how – how – did he come ri – did this gentleman come up to you?

A: No. The – he – this officer did not come up to me, but i – sort of examined me, looked at me. See, later we found out he had two daughters who were my age, more or less. So that was very likely the connection. Anyway, he – he – once, I was trying to warm myself again, and the – the stove **[indecipherable]** burner was cooling off. There was almost no heat. So I knew him, and I recognize him as he was marching with his unit. It was something I –

Q: And was your mother there?

A: – I introduced them. And that's how they, quote, met, and the ye – years later, her – got to know each other a little better.

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Q: What was his name?

A: Well, **Vavjinya(ph) Soletski(ph)**.

Q: How do I – could you say that again, his name?

A: **Lawrence Soletski(ph), Vavjinitz(ph) Soletski(ph)**.

Q: **Lawrence Soletski(ph)**?

A: It's **Danuta's** father.

Q: I see, so **Danuta** is your sister?

A: She is my sister on my mother's side.

Q: I see. Okay, okay. And so, in other words, your mother's second husband, you introduced her to her second husband?

A: Yeah, yeah, wa – that's was the unusual part of circumstances.

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

A: That was in the **Soviet Union** with the – with **[indecipherable]** being formed to po – po – Polish units for the – I think it's the Fifth Army that – that had the Polish forces.

Q: And then you didn't see – and then you left for **Persia**? And after that you left for **Persia**?

A: Well, they put us in buses, and some crazy drivers started driving crazy way on – in the mount – very mountainous area.

Q: Oh, you mean in **Persia**?

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A: In **Persia**, yeah, the – the – the drivers smoked this – some drug, whatever. And really, there were precipices right next – next – the straight wheel.

Q: Oh my goodness.

A: And you – you would – you would swear you'd fall through and it was sort of frightening, but –

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

A: Well, my mother tried to, like all the other mothers tried to quiet the kids, by reassure them.

Q: And by this point, how old were you?

A: [**indecipherable**] I wouldn't be – I would be about 11 – 10?

Q: How long did you stay in **Persia**?

A: I think we were there about two years, **Teheran**.

Q: What was life like for you in **Persia**?

A: Hm?

Q: What was life like for you there?

A: We – there was no difference. We were refugee camp.

Q: Was it a –

A: They dumped us here, then they dumped us somewhere else, and so on, so on. They did the best they could, maybe.

Q: Was the food – did you – did you get enough food?

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A: Well, we had a reasonable amount of food, I suppose.

Q: And what about your mother, was she working?

A: Well, in **Persia** she started work as a nurse.

Q: Okay. And –

A: With the – with that – that camp hospital, whatever.

Q: Did you – what were the facilities like? Were they – were they different than they had been in the **Soviet Union**? Were there places to take baths?

A: I think they were something **[indecipherable]** we were in **[indecipherable]** tents and in – in – in **[indecipherable]** tents, and there were – we were told those were stables that the Germans kept the horses in. This was now a rather hot season, in a hot country. Every noon or so, there was a sandstorm.

Q: Every day?

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

Q: My goodness, what – what a situation.

A: Yeah, well, we were there for some – for few months, I don't know how long. But we were glad to move somewhere else. Anyway, that particular experience was a rather unusual.

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

A: No, I don't remember it would – all together, maybe over a year, a year and a half.

Q: Okay.

A: But you have to keep in mind, all the time listening to me, rattling on some –

Q: You're not rattling on.

A: It – it was a – it was different, but Mother managed to get better at [indecipherable] assistance, because she was a nurse. And that made it that much better.

Q: And, did you go to school at any point?

A: Well, th-these camps always had provisions of some sort of school, and some sort of medical possible assistance. Those that had the relatives in the army had better sup – better assistance.

Q: I see.

A: We didn't have any – any assistance, so Mother was the only one that took care of that.

Q: It's amazing – it's amazing what she was able to do.

A: Well, it was – it was difficult.

Q: Yeah. Did she ever cry? Did you ever see her cry?

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

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Q: Okay, not in – during these years?

A: No, no.

Q: Okay. Did you ever cry during this time?

A: When the – my feet were burning.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

Q: What about when you lost the doggie?

A: What?

Q: When **Figa** ran away, did you cry then?

A: The what?

Q: When **Figa** ran away, did you – **Figa**, your little dog.

A: Oh, th – when **Figa** ran away, well, I did cry then, yes. We were trying to get that little dog out, because it went – jumped into the very deep sn – rather deep snow [**indecipherable**] likely froze.

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

A: Well, we're – we are born, and we die. Some of it has many turns and twists, and some of it is smooth.

Q: That's true. And so you had a lot of turns and twists, early on.

A: Yeah.

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Q: What happened after **Persia**? After – you said you were there in **Persia** for a couple of years.

A: Yeah, about – well, Mother and I were there, but the armies, th-the – the Fifth Army went to **Libya** and **Syria**, and ended up in wa – **Egypt**, and **Italy**. That's how the armies went. But those that had some sort of contact with the – someone in the army, got like, some support. And those that didn't, well, they had to do – were in like in – in a refugee, concentration camps. They had to put them to – in the places where they can get to them, or assist them.

Q: And did you say you – you moved ca – from one camp to another within **Persia**?

A: Well, in **Persia**, I think, there were two camps that we were in.

Q: And then, how was it you – I assume you left **Persia** at some point.

A: Well, th-they just took us south, keep on going south, from **Persia** to **India**.
India –

Q: Okay.

A: – to – to **England**, and then over here.

Q: When you first went to **Persia**, it was probably in 1941 or two, something like that?

A: It would be – **Persia**? Yeah, about that.

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Q: Okay. 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?

A: Well, when the war ended, exactly, I think we were in – in **India**.

Q: You were in **India**. And how is that you were taken to **India**, why **India**?

A: They had open a – they had one of th-those unused camps, and the build – the accommodation was there, it just – it – it just – the money had to be allotted to – to feed us.

Q: So was this a British camp?

A: The – the – the – the camps, the camps were – this particular camp were – Mother worked as a – a – a – a – what do you call – not refu – I'm looking for a word that I can't –

Q: Yeah.

A: Ref – no, it's a refugee camp. I'll thi-think of it when I go.

Q: Of course, you always remember things once it's all – everything's all done.

You'll think of it a few hours from now.

A: Orphanage.

Q: She worked at an orphanage.

A: The camp was mostly orphanage children, all s – s – part – part orphanage. In other words, they had only one parent.

Q: Okay.

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A: Or t-t – they were missing two parents.

Q: I see.

A: But moth – Mother was working there, and there was – the refugee camps, they were trying to run permanent settlements, whatever, where there was a school, there was a church, and th-that kind of thing.

Q: And was – was it – this run by Polish authorities, or British authorities?

A: Well, i-it was run by Polish authorities, but th-the – they must – the funds came – well, they came from the government that was on temporary jurisdiction.

Q: You mean, the Polish government in exile?

A: The what?

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

A: Well, I think to the country that – that they were in.

Q: So, if it was in **Persia**, it would belong to the Persians, if in **India**, it belonged to –

A: Well, I think so. I d – I don't think that ever came up –

Q: Okay. Okay.

A: – as a question, but th-they were used as refugee concentration camps.

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

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A: Yeah.

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

A: Well, i-it's a – that's what – what they tried.

Q: How long did you stay there, with your mother, in **India**?

A: Oh, **India**, I think were about four years.

Q: That's a good long time. That's a – what part of **India** were you in?

A: **Karachi** to **Bombay**, along that part. A few places, but –

Q: Okay.

A: We had ver – relatively little contact, or communication with the – with the country itself, because we were simply the refugee [indecipherable]

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

A: About that. We left after the **India** received its changeover, and the – became not part of the English empire, but **India**.

Q: Ah, so when the **India** – **India** became independent.

A: Independent, yeah.

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

A: Well, **England**. Mother and I went – went to **England** to – to – then **Danuta's** father and my mother married, and we decided to try out American soil.

Q: And how old were you when you came to the ameri – to the **United States**?

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A: Well, I was college age.

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

A: Early 50s.

Q: Early 50s. And where was – where was **Danuta** born? In **Britain**?

A: In **Britain**.

Q: 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?

A: 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 – to tell me – taught me – well, I guess, the poem. I d – I don't remember the – that – the author, whatever, but anyway, we – we were playing, the kids were playing hide and seek or something, and I – I was with them. They started to go – go on the loft. Well, going back to the problem what Mother was doing, making bundles of these twigs to feed the goat, it was po – essential that you don't shake the – the bundles, because the leaves would fall off, and the goats wouldn't get any food. So you had – Mother make me be – listen very carefully, and not a-allow, or t-talk to the kids, not to go and play on – in the loft. Well, one time the kids made comments about this and that. Finally,

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one said, oh, to the ghost, that they – that they heard noises, whatever, like finally one of them says – says, oh, if we ta – say a prayer, it will all right.

Q: Okay, so they thought that –

A: So we started saying a prayer, but the boy – I don't know which prayer it was, but anyway, they started saying a prayer, and I was saying the same ti – prayer, but I – I was thinking so hard, how am I going to stop all those kids going up there. Finally, I decided not – not to say a prayer.

Q: Not to say one.

A: No ... not to say a prayer.

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

A: Well, he did ...

Q: So **Mira**, it's okay. Again, this is something you'll remember later. That often happens to people.

A: No. It's a –

A2: You were wor – one or two words behind in the prayer, and they thought it was a ghost. Remember that part of it?

A: The what?

A2: You were saying it, the prayer, one or two words behind, and they thought it was a ghost, remember?

A: Not that one, no.

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A2: No?

Q: That's okay.

A: No.

Q: It's okay. Is there anything else you'd like to add to what we've talked about?

A: Well, I don't know, you've been very patient with me, but – and this is a – a somewhat unfair trial for me.

Q: I can understand that, and I appreciate – I know that it has 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 23rd, 2015.

[break]

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Q: Okay. This is the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with **Danuta Soletski(ph) Urbikas**, on January 23rd, 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.

A: 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 – well, they escaped actually, from the labor camp. And it was in **Tatishchevo**, 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 **Jelibod(ph)**, which was in **Uzbekistan**, or I don't know, it's on the border, near **Tashkins(ph)**. **Tashkins(ph)** was another area where the Polish army had gone, and this is maybe 1500 miles or more away from **Tatishchevo**, or near **Saratov**.

Q: Okay. So I would like to – for us to trace. I mean, some of the things that I asked **Mira**, she didn't remember where she wa – you know, what the towns were, and so on. And tell me, how is it that you know all of these places?

A: 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

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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. And I did lot of research, and you know, interviewed my parents, mostly my father, and also other historians who were aware of – of this migration, this whole journey of these people that had been deported.

Q: Okay, so I'd like to start from – from the beginning at least, but we'll run through it, okay?

A: Okay.

Q: So, **Mira** was born in **Grodno**, and that was in what part of **Poland**?

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

Q: Okay. And from **Grodno**, do you know what deportation they were taken on?

Was it the February one?

A: The February 10th one, yes, in 1940.

Q: Okay. And where were they taken to?

A: They were taken first to a camp at – across the **Urals**, which would have been technically **Siberia**. And I'm trying to remember the – one was **Mikelinska**(ph), do you remember that name? And the other one, I am drawing a blank.

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Q: Okay.

A: 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 of **Molotov**. And that was where they really were for the duration of the time in the – in the labor camp.

Q: So **Perm** was a pretty tough place.

A: Mm-hm.

Q: The – some of the stories that **Mira** shared with us today, are they ones that you are familiar with, that you had heard about before?

A: Oh yes, I grew up with these stories, you know, but – you know, these were things that were discussed, especially at – 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, you know, this was something that was so large a part of their lives. Especially my mother. You know, my father talked about it, but my mother was very – you know, she – she wo – she went through so much, you know?

Q: So, if I can repeat a little bit, just to make sure that I'm clear about, she had to work as a lumberjack?

A: Right. She was fairly tall for a Polish person, maybe not as tall as I am, but she was, you know, generally speaking, the – the Soviets took people who were

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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 f – 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 – and yes, there was one occasion when she – I don't know, you know, she was so tired by then, and – and malnourished, and just, you know, 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 – and so this tree was falling on her, and she just kind of stood there, and you know, they – and watched this tree coming towards her, and at the last second she jumped into like a pile of rubble, and the – the branches from this rubble actually cut the –

Q: Broke the –

A: – broke the fall. So she – she was in there, and they thought – the Soviets, the brigadier, the supervisor of the – of the work team thought she was trying to kill herself, you know. And so they got mad at her for – for, you know, doing that. And so eventually, actually turned out to be a good thing, because she ended up getting a new job working – fixing – changing the oil on tractors, and also filling – there was one steam tractor that she had to fill water. And she got paid more for that. But, you know, in the co – in the course of all of that, you know, she di – she

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

Q: Okay. I wanted to get a sense of how this – how this developed, the context of such a bizarre thing, to be taken to court for, you know, having hay.

A: Actually, there were two court incidences. One was the hay, and then there was another one where she was late for work, cause she had gotten – like 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, you know, to lose that money, it was really, really difficult.

Q: Okay. And did you ever know, or did she ever – was she ever told why she was deported?

A: Because she was a landowner.

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Q: That's what I thought, that's what I thought.

A: And – and also, I think they may have also known that her – they were still married, even though they were separated, her husband was a – a soldier, you know, he was sergeant in the army.

Q: Okay, okay. 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.

A: Right, they – 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 had tried to get official permission to leave the camp, but they weren't – they really did not want to give it to her, so essentially, they escaped.

Q: So tell me, this incident what – that **Mira** was talking about, where she would be a Red Cross nurse, and **Mira** would be left in an orphanage, was this –

A: Well, that's much later, actually.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: That's much later. Yeah, at – when – when my mother and sister were escaped from the labor camp, they made their way down the **Volga**. And this is that

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incident with the little girl falling and being killed in the steamboat. And they made it to – oh, now I'm drawing a blank. I think **Kra-Krasnovodsk**, you think?

A2: **Kra-Krasnovodsk**.

A: **Krasnovodsk**. And then they went from there, down the **Caspian Sea** to **Pahlevi**, right? Or no, actually, I'm skipping something. There was a lot – there was – all these people were coming off of these collective farms, or there – you know, some of them were sent to collective farms, and more in labor camps. And there was a huge mass of people, and they na – 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 – to go. Finally they ended up getting out after that. And in that turmoil, that's when they met my father again, okay?

Q: I see.

A: So, because getting out of the **Soviet Union** already, things were much better by then. There was an official, the British were helping to establish these resettlement camps, and one was in **Teheran**, 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 there were there as – as **Mira** said, you know, for several years, with my mother

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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.

Q: Okay. 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 you're telling me, is that the camp they ended up staying in was bet – was in **Perm**, the region of **Perm**.

A: Oh, the labor camp, yes.

Q: The labor camp. From there they escaped, and made their way to a river, where they were in a steamboat, and then went down to **Krasnovodsk**, is that wh-where you were saying?

A: They went to **Tatishchevo**.

Q: **Tatishchevo**.

A: Near as –

Q: And what is **Tatishchevo**?

A: It's a city or town near **Saratov**.

Q: I see, okay, in **Russia** itself.

A: In **Russia**, yes.

Q: And it was in **Tatishchevo** that they met your father –

A: Right.

Q: – for the first time?

A: Right.

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

A: 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 –

Q: Let me stop right there. Was he in eastern **Poland**?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay.

A: Yes.

Q: And so how did he end up in **Lithuania**?

A: They were trying to protect the **Augusta(ph) Forest** canals, and – from the Germans, and they were – o-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 – they got caught and – and sent to an internment camp in **Lithuania**. And from there they were sent – he was sent to the camp in **Kozelsk**.

Q: **Kozelsk**.

A: Or – or **Kozelsk**, yeah.

Q: So he was a Russian **POW**?

A: Right.

Q: Okay. He was a Polish **POW** –

A: **POW**.

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Q: – under the Soviets, excuse me.

A: Right, right.

Q: And – and he was not – he was not shot.

A: No, there was – hi – at 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 in – attacked **Poland** – I mean, **Russia**, and so they were camped there for a while. And then, of course, the Polish government agreed, you know, th-that – there was the agreement with the Soviets to form this Polish army.

A2: **Armestu**(ph).

A: It was ca – yeah, was –

Q: Yeah, an amnesty.

A: – the amnesty. And so then, from there, I – somehow he – you know, made his way towards **Tatishchevo**, or **Saratov**.

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

A: 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.

A2: Well, no, he's th – I was holding up a box, a – a – a matchbox of some sort.

A: Okay.

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A2: Well anyway, in that matchbox, Mother gave me pa – a pile of rubles, or something like that, and sh-she told me to keep it with me, in case I got lost, or – or d-don't have anything to – to – that I would be able to buy some food.

Q: I see. Okay.

A2: And he – 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.

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

A2: Yeah.

A: Okay, so he put some candy in this little box, and – and then you came back another time, trying to meet up with him to get more candy, I think, or something.

A2: Oh, I think the – he – he earned some soldiers [indecipherable] bought kids some sugar, and some honey.

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

Q: I see. And did he talk about this – these stories as well, and this incident?

A: Yeah, he did, yeah, he did.

Q: Okay, so when he met **Mira** the first time, and so on.

A2: Mm-hm.

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Q: And then **Mira** introduced him to your mother.

A: Right. Well, as it's – as she said, they we-were marching in formation for some kind of maneuver, and she saw him and started running up to him, and you know, he broke rank and came over, and met my mother.

Q: Okay.

A: Our mother.

Q: Yeah. And then, after the meeting at **Tatishchevo**, you **Mira**, and your mom, went further south, is this it? Or you were on those trains that were going back and forth?

A: 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, you know, November, December of '41, and there was very little food, and my mother was – our mother was trying to find, you know, 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 another – you know, to – to a resettlement camp. Actually, my father sent money – she – they say – I don't know how they managed to stay in mail contact, but our mother asked him for s – help, because she really – they were so destitute, she – they had – they – their luggage was stolen, this is the –

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A2: Sh-She wrote a letter to the gi – center office of the – of the forming units.

She owned some scrap of torn paper, she managed to send that, and it got to your father.

A: And he sent an incredibly large amount of money, which I'm sure he collected from the other soldiers, of like 367 –

A2: Twenty – 300 some –

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

A2: Any money se – being sent by mail, it was a miracle we got that.

A: Yeah, it was – it was quite a miracle that that money got – and that really saved them, because they – 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.

Q: So it sounds like it was almost the first kindness that she had received –

A: Well –

Q: – from all this – from all of these experiences.

A: Well, could – probab – the one that, course, stands out the most.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah.

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Q: And then it was after that, and they got better, that – from where did they leave the **Soviet Union**?

A: So they made it over to – oh, now I'm losing my train of thought here.

A2: **Kovachi**(ph)?

A: No, no, no, that's **India. Krasnovodsk** – am I saying that right? And then from there, to **Pahlevi**.

Q: Which is in **Iran**.

A: Which is in **Iran**. And then from there to **Teheran**. And then when she talks about the – the steep hills, that's that journey there. And then from **Teheran** to **India**.

Q: Okay. And how many years difference is there between you?

A: Fifteen.

Q: Fifteen. And your parents married where, in what – in what of these many places?

A: 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 he – one his jobs was to weed out communists from the army, and he's 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 – the thinking was, if – if you don't go back to communist **Poland** – and of

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course my mother and sister knew all about communism, and they weren't going back, so they – you know, they went to **England**, and so did my father, after he fought in **Italy**, in **Monte Cassino**.

Q: He fought in **Monte Cassino**?

A: He did. And there was a – again a – a reli – a resettlement camp for soldiers in **Herford**, and my sister and mother ended up in **Coventry**, and that's not too far away. And my mother decided to try to find some of the people she had met, and he being one of them, and I ge – it was the soldiers' daily newspaper, something like that, she put an ad in there, and he answered it. And he – at that point he – he was in the hospital because he had a accident, and she went to visit him, and the rest is history, and here I am.

Q: And let us know his name again?

A: It's **Vavjinitz**(ph), and Americans translate that to **Lawrence**, although I'm not sure that's correct.

Q: Okay, **Vavjinitz**(ph).

A: **Vavjinitz**(ph) **Soletski**(ph).

Q: **Soletski**(ph). And when you talked about him rooting out – looking for communists in the military, that is trying to find them, does this mean the re-formed military that was part of the Soviet **[indecipherable]**

A: Mm-hm.

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Q: – within the Soviet unit, and then left?

A: Right. He was with **Anders** –

Q: I see.

A: – with what [**indecipherable**] **Anders**, the general.

Q: Okay.

A: In the second corps, fifth division.

Q: I see. And so that was one of his duties.

A: Yeah.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you very, very much **Danuta** –

A: Okay.

Q: – we appreciate you participating and expanding on **Mira's** remarkable story.

A: Yeah.

Q: Thank you to both of you.

A2: Thank you.

Q: Okay.

A: Thank you.

Q: So this concludes our interview, the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** interview with **Danuta Soletski(ph) Urbikas**.

Conclusion of Interview