

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Samuel Rachlin on May 12, 2015, in Washington DC, at the USHMM. Thank you very much, Mr. Rachlin, for agreeing to speak with us today to share your story.

My pleasure. My pleasure.

We are going to conduct this interview in the same sequence that we do all of them, starting at the very beginning. But there will be many questions that I will ask you about events that happened before your birth in order to be able to tell the full story of what your family's destiny was.

So without further ado, I start at the beginning, and I ask. So can you tell me, what was the date of your birth?

I was born on January 12, 1947, in a Siberian village, Pokrovsk, on the Lena River.

And what was your name at birth?

Well, it was the same as it is now, but it was pronounced differently in Russian.

Tell me.

"Sam-wheel Ah-rach-lin."

"Sam-wheel Ah-rach-lin."

And of course it had-- in my birth certificate, it also has my father-- my patronymic. My father was Israel, so by that token, I was Samuel Israelivich Rachlin.

OK. How is it that you were born in this place, this small village, Pokrovsk, on the Lena River? Was it that your family was from there?

No. I had the good luck to be born there after the war. My parents, who had the good luck, I have to say, to have been deported six years prior to that, earlier, in June 1941, from Kybartai, where they lived in Lithuania, a few days before the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union broke out, like thousands of other people from Lithuania, from the other Baltic states, from other regions and republics of the Soviet Union in that period.

Not because it was a Jewish family, but they were deported along with people of all faiths. It was not primarily their religion that determined whether they would be among the deportees, but their social and political status.

Can I stop you just for a second?

Sure.

When you talk about deportee, does that mean this was voluntary or involuntary? [LAUGHS] No. Lithuania had been first occupied and then annexed. I mean, it was-- it followed in a few steps, after the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact that was signed in August 1939.

Then what-- we-- that's world history, what followed after that. But one of the consequences was that the division of Europe was-- between Hitler and Stalin, they divided Poland between each other. And then the Baltic states were part of the deal, like part of Bessarabia. Finland was also into that--

So which area did these--

And my parents lived in Lithuania. My father was born in Kybartai-- or "Ki-bar-tie," there are several different

pronunciations of that town-- and they had settled there. And they lived there.

And then when the Soviet-- after these historic events, when the Soviets first established military bases and then occupied and annexed Lithuania like they did with the two other Baltic republics, they became small grains of sand.

Your-- who did?

[LAUGHS] My parents and my family, in that big game that they had no influence on. They were caught in that political game. My father was a businessman, and that was primarily the reason why they were rounded up on July--

By whom?

By the Soviet Security police, NKVD, N-K-V-D, on that infamous day, June 14, 1941. And then, well, then that whole-- that triggered that-- all those events that led, eventually, in 1947, them ending up in that little village in Pokrovsk, where I was born.

Excuse me. We'll talk about the deportation in some detail. We'll talk about the sequence. But I wanted to establish right now that as a deportation, that it was not something that they wished for. Is this--

No. I think, semantically, a deportation is not something that you do voluntarily. When you are deported, this is done by force, by coercion. You are arrested. They were arrested.

They were rounded up. My parents, my grandmother, my father's mother, that is, who lived-- they lived with her, and my older brother, and my sister, who was an infant. And they were taken on the truck.

My brother was picked up from a farm, where he was staying with my father's cousin. And then they were taken to a train station, put into cattle wagons with hundreds, thousands of other people, and that was it.

And yet you mentioned very early on that they had-- was it a happy fate, or--

Well, they had the good luck. Because they were arrested on the 14th of June, taken to the station. They stayed there in [NON-ENGLISH], I think it was, the station, the nearby railway station. And on June 19, they took off.

And the war broke out on-- well, Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union on June 22. So there were three days in between. And the good luck, it means-- what I mean by that is that had they stayed--

Had they not been arrested.

Had they not been arrested and sent off, deported, they would have stayed there like all the other Jewish families, in Kybartai and the surrounding towns, and they all perished.

All those Jews there perished? Can we stop for a second? It's OK. It's OK. That's why I have this.

Sorry, I didn't-- I didn't expect that.

It happens. It happens. And here's another one for later on.

So--

Are we rolling again?

Yes, roll again. I think I can control it now.

It's OK. It's OK. Don't worry. So you're-- so this was a very complicated-- a complicated and very bitter set of events.

Well, I mean, it's a paradoxical situation. I have written about it. I have described it as this-- in our family's case-- as this strange paradox. When Hitler and Stalin had signed that, or their foreign minister had signed that pact, they were friends. They were almost allies, would be the correct description of that relationship.

And what happened was that this intermezzo that played out just before the war broke out, before Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in this Operation Barbarossa, it left that margin that saved the lives of my parents and thousands of other Jewish families, because you can say that almost Stalin cheated Hitler by taking out some of the potential victims and enemies, as Hitler considered them, days before. And Kybartai, as you may know, is right on the border with what used to be East Prussia--

And so Germany.

That is Germany, which is now the Kaliningrad region. And they were in that town on the first day, on June 22.

So the German-- then the Nazi armies, the Nazi forces--

They were-- they invaded. They were there on the first day of the war and started rounding up the Jewish families on the first day of their invasion.

So I want to-- I just want to interrupt again, just for a term of clarity and precision. You referred to the beginning of the war. And very many people in this part of the world do refer to the beginning of the war as when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union. And that would be June 21, 1941--

22nd.

22nd, 1941. We're talking about when the war started there.

Yes. Of course. It had started-- the actual war started in 1939, September 1, 1939, right after they had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. But then there was-- the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were friends.

So tell me, let's go a little bit-- before we go into your family, and as I said, I'll want to know about your father and your mother and their families. Let's talk a little bit historically. As you yourself are a professional journalist and have written about this, explain to people, explain to those who will be listening to this interview, why would Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which ended up such bitter enemies, have-- how did this come to be, that they were friends, that they signed a pact? What was this pact, and what was its purpose?

Well, I mean, you know, I'm not a historian, and this chapter of history has been well researched and described, although I would say neglected somewhat in the years between. I mean, not so much attention has been paid to the significance of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and that alliance. Because it was called the non-aggression pact, but it was much more than that. It was a collaboration, a cooperation pact. And of course there was the secret protocol that they had signed, in which they agreed how to divide Europe between--

Which part of Europe?

Well, primarily Poland. They decided to divide Poland almost in half. The Western parts should belong to Germany-- or should be the German sphere of influence, while Stalin and the Soviet Union was allowed to occupy and in turn go into the Eastern part.

So in other words, it's another partition. If Poland was --

This was the first partition of Europe in modern times. And which, in my interpretation, gave Stalin and the Soviet leadership a taste of how they could expand their empire. And it is amazing how they collaborated.

There was a situation when the operation started, and the Russians came in from the east, and the Germans had come in from the west. And they stopped at the city of Brest. And according to the agreement, Brest should belong to the Russian influence.

So when the Russians moved in, they amicably decided how to-- that the Germans should move out. The Russians should take over. It was part of-- they considered this to be part of Belarus, eventually. And they agreed that they would have a military parade together. The German and the Soviet troops had a military parade attended by their Supreme Commander. They--

In Brest.

In Brest. I mean, these are facts. They embraced each other. They fraternized. They were friends. And what followed was more than that.

Russia started supplying the Nazi war machine with energy resources, primarily oil, with natural resources, for the war industry. As poor as Russia was, they provided Nazi Germany with agricultural products. At the same time, Germany helped building up the Russian war machine and the Russian defense and military industry. So--

[LAUGHS] I mean, it makes me laugh because if they were doing that, and yet Stalin was cutting off the heads of his own generals right before the war.

Exactly. I mean, this is part of that incredible history. And I'm not revealing anything here, because it is, of course, in the history books. But I still think that--

I have recently read-- an English historian spoke about it. It's called *The Devil's Alliance*, a recent book about the--

The pact?

About the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. And all these details now come up. And it's not just history. It just came up a few days ago in Moscow, during the celebration of Victory Day, when the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact surfaced in a press conference that Vladimir Putin, President Putin, was giving together with Chancellor Angela Merkel.

And the incredible thing is that more than 70 years, it's since-- 76 years later, Putin is defending. President Putin is defending the Molotov-Ribbentrop, trying to justify it and tries to present it as an expression of the Soviet peace will, and that this was a justified, a good act. It was a justifiable act, because it provided peace for the Soviet Union.

In other words, peace in our time.

Well, [LAUGHS] from-- he actually quoted Chamberlain and Churchill in that press conference. And Angela Merkel, thankfully, condemned it. Said that it was a horrible, immoral act that had caused a lot of trouble. But that played out just two or three days ago.

In 2015?

Well, you know, on May 10, 2015, when Angela Merkel came to Moscow to pay tribute. She didn't come on May 9, for the victory parade, but she came the day after, to place a wreath or some flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, to pay tribute to the Soviet role, the role the Soviet Union played in World War II. No other Western leaders came for the parade either.

So what we are talking about is history, but it's still surfacing in our day. So in my parents' case, That created there what I call the paradox. Because had they not been arrested along with the other ones, they would have left behind, and all Jewish families perished. I mean, they were all rounded up the very first days of the war. And--

Did you research later, did you hear later, did you learn later, the details of--

I did.

OK. Can you tell us a little bit about what happened to the other Jews of Kybartai?

I came back-- when I was working as a correspondent in Moscow-- I've worked there, as you may know, twice, both in the Soviet period, from 1977 to '84, and then I came back for a different Danish TV station in the late '90s. And on that, during that assignment, I had a chance to go to Lithuania for the first time.

When I was there as a correspondent in the Soviet years for a Danish TV station, I was never allowed to go to Lithuania. I went to Latvia. I was allowed to go to Estonia. But they never gave me a visa to go to Lithuania.

But now, when I came back in '98-- and I didn't stay there. I was sort of a roving correspondent. I came in, I stayed for a few weeks, or as far as the events required, but I had an apartment, and I started on a documentary about my parents' deportation, trying to make a documentary for Danish television.

And during that project, I met some Lithuanians who had also connections, who had also been deported or had parents or grandparents who had been deported, and thereby, I established a connection. I went back, I think, in 2000.

To Kybartai?

To Kybartai.

For the first time?

For the first time. And then I met the former mayor of Kybartai, whom my father had contacted after the-- in the mid '90s, I believe--

So after independence?

After independence. And I looked him up. And I found him. And he took us around, and he showed me-- I was with a local Lithuanian cameraman. And this was a private visit. I was not planning to do any story here. So he showed me around. He took me to the house and--

House of whom?

Oh, my parents' house. It was still standing. It was standing right there, close to the border with Kaliningrad now, as my parents had described. It was very close to the border. And he showed me the Jewish cemetery, where I found my grandfather's grave, or the remains of the grave, and his-- my grandfather's brother's grave. They were-- I had a photograph.

So my grandfather's grave was gone, but the base of the gravestone of his brother was left. And it said, Ilia Rachlin. So I could identify my grandfather's grave. So we restored the grave and the gravestone, copied, made exact copies, had an unveiling. I came with my sister a year or two later.

But I'm sorry. I want to interrupt here. Because is it for you--

What I want to come to is that the former mayor, who my father had contacted, introduced me to his father-in-law, [? Valentinas. ?] So I have his name because I have written about it. I can't recall it right now. But he was an older man. He was in his 80s. And we went to his little garden, a little outside of--

Kybartai?

Kybartai. And so I started asking him if he could tell me what happened back then, after they had been deported, my

parents and the other Jews. And he said what happened was that the Germans started rounding up the Jewish families almost immediately. And he was in his late teens. He was around-- he was about 17, 18 years old.

And he then told me that he and other young men were summoned to the local Nazi commander, who told them that they had an assignment for them. And they were given shuttles, taken out of town, and asked to dig some very long and deep ravines, graves, or whatever you would call it. I don't know the exact English word for it.

But it was-- and they were told-- and they asked for what. And then they were told it was for cattle and horses that had been killed that would be buried there. And then a few days later, they found out what the purpose was, because they saw that the Jewish families that had been arrested were taken out of town in long lines and taken in the direction of where they had been digging that grave, the trench.

And what happened then was they heard machine gun salvos that went on and on, as he described, for hours, in his description. And then at a later visit, he had-- then that was just a few years ago, when--

In the late '90s, early 2000s?

No. It was just three years ago, so it was in the fall of 2012 or '13. I went-- I took my brother back there-- I think he must have told you-- with his son. And we-- and then the former mayor was our guide again. And then he took us to the place. He had not shown it to me before.

And there was a-- it was like a field. And there was a stone, a small, gray granite stone, that said that this is the place where the Jews of Kybartai had been--

Had been killed.

Had been executed by the Nazis and their Lithuanian helpers, assistants. And I think it's about 600 people were buried there. And then he told us that his father-in-law had told him-- which he didn't tell me back then at the first meeting-- that when they heard the machine gun salvos, the young people who had been digging the trenches, they went up to some houses that had a view down to that place, and climbed on the roofs and were observing [LAUGHS] what was playing out there, [LAUGHS] right until the moment when the German soldiers saw it, that they were sitting out there on the roof, and they started shooting at them. So they packed up. They ran away.

So they were witnesses. So we know exactly from that account-- I mean, it was not hard to figure out what would have happened. I mean, either they would be shot at a mass grave, or they would have been detained in a ghetto or sent to a concentration camp. So this is what played out, and this was the alternative, and that's how I have-- when I have described it, this paradox, that the deportation, which was definitely not voluntary or a rescue, turned out in my parents' case, and in the case of the other Jewish families, as a rescue.

So when I described it an essay I have written about it, I said, there are not many families from those years who have something to thank Stalin for, but in my family's case, we could say thank you, Comrade Stalin, that you deported us. [LAUGHS] I mean, on my parents' behalf.

So it was definitely not a rescue, but in my analysis, the chances-- the chances of survival in that special gray zone of the Gulag that my parents ended up in, like the other deportees, were bigger than the chances of survival had they been left behind with the Germans. So that is the interesting paradox in my parents' case and thousands of other Jewish families' cases from that period.

And also I have to say, this was a really tough rescue, if I--

If one has to be rescued. [LAUGHS]

If I can phrase it that way. But again, in my family's case, it was-- it had-- it was a happy end. They survived. You know, 40% of the deportees, they perished. They died after two years of deportation, you know, up there at the Arctic

Ocean.

My parents had the-- that's why I'm saying they were lucky. That they had the good luck that they, either by Providence or by their will to survive, they made it. They made it through with their physical and mental health, in good shape, and they were lucky enough that they could get back to Denmark, my mother's home country, in 1957.

So we have so many things to cover here.

[LAUGHS]

We will want to cover. Because that survival is something that we'll talk about in greater detail. And we'll go back before the war, to some extent. But I want to return now to these moments, where as a journalist, you went in the late '90s, early 2000, to Kybartai for the first time.

Yes.

And you actually, from your telling, learned of the details of what happened to the Jews of Kybartai from a witness, from an eyewitness to the events rather than from a history book or from other pieces of writing. The detail-- it-- one would assume one would know in general terms what had happened. But can I make that assumption, that it was from an eyewitness that you learned this?

Absolutely. Absolutely. And Valentinas was very-- he was an old man, short man, very nice, very soft spoken. And we were sitting in that little vegetable garden of his, on some benches. But he was very eloquent. And he was clearly very affected.

How did that show [BOTH TALKING]

[LAUGHS] That was -- By retelling the story. I don't know how much he-- I mean, he was a little unwilling to start talking about it. So I had to use some of my interview skills, like you do, [LAUGHS] to make him speak. But then he opened up, and it was very hard for him.

Was it? Do you think that--

And I don't know if he told me the whole story. But that was what I was able to sort of glean and get out of him. I don't see any reason why he shouldn't tell me the truth.

Maybe there are more horrible stories, I don't know, he wanted to spare me, for my father's cousin perished. We don't know the details or the circumstances, whether he was shot at his farm, where my brother-- I think my brother must have told you about it too. But he was one of the victims.

And so he may have been one of those at those trenches, shot on that particular day, or maybe--

So you know don't know his specifics.

We don't know. And we have tried to find that farm. We have not been able. And my brother doesn't remember the location. Of course, he was five years old. We have the name of the location, so maybe someday we will be able to go back and see.

I mean, there's still untold-- I mean, so many years later, there are stories that are untold or aren't revealed. And Valentinas was one of the, probably, last witnesses.

I would think so.

It's not likely that there are many witnesses from those years who are left or who are alive and who are able to tell those

stories. But you know, the whole area is covered by mass graves. I mean, it's nothing exceptional for Kybartai. It affects me, because it's part of our family history. But I mean, the whole area is full.

We visited some of the other mass graves. And now there are monuments, there are marks, there are stones. So it's not hidden, as it used to be.

And well, you know, the way I perceive it is that when I talk about my family's history, this-- we were on the edge of the Holocaust. It was a close call. You can say that my family avoided that fate by a very, very small-- a very thin margin, by a hair. And so that is the reason-- you asked why I was saying that they had the good luck. That's the good luck.

I understand. I understand. Do you think-- you seem a little bit surprised that you were so moved by this aspect, this-- were you-- do you think that his reaction and his difficulty in talking to you was part of what also you were moved by, as well as the content of what he was saying?

Well, you know, first of all, I'm an emotional guy. So I'm easily moved. But this is-- I think these are really emotional and difficult matters to talk about. Because one thing is when you talk about history, it's abstract. It's distant. It's remote.

You read it. It's an academic or a journalistic venture, and you have distance. When it's your family, it hits close to home, literally. And it was-- of course I had, as a kid and as a young man and as an adult, I had many images of what Kybartai was like.

My father talked a lot about it, and they have described it also in their four volumes of memoirs. So I knew. But it was very different to be there and walk around and see this as it was. It was like a *deja vu* or a dream that you re-saw that you were in.

And this was real. I was in their house. I was at the cemetery. I was there at the border post. I walked the streets. And it all came back.

And then when you are faced with an eyewitness' account of what played out there, these horrors, mm, well, even an unemotional person would be affected and moved by it. So it was-- I would say it was strong material. It was powerful, in any respect, because it makes things from being abstract to being very concrete.

Thank you. Let's go back now and talk about prewar life. Tell me a little bit about your father's family. What was their business, how they came to be in Kybartai, how he came to be a business man, and what did that mean, in those terms that he would have been enough of a businessman that he would have been arrested. But first let's talk about history.

It didn't take much to be arrested during those years. But I will tell you as much as I know about the prehistory. My father was born on December 26, 1906, right at the turn of the century, in Kybartai, into a wealthy Jewish family of merchants. And they had lived there-- I don't know, actually, when they settled there.

My grandfather, my father's father, was born in Ukraine, in a small shtetl there, on the border between-- in that corner of Ukraine, close to Belarus and Russia. I haven't been there, but my father knew the place and the name of the shtetl.

And so I can tell you, I think they must have settled in Kybartai before the turn of the century. I mean, late 19th century. And my grandfather and his brother were running this business, which--

What kind?

This was-- primarily they were horse traders, which doesn't sound of much, but it actually was a very successful business operation. They bought horses in different parts of Russia, and they exported them for two purposes, as workhorses for the agricultural sector all around Europe, and for meat consumption in Belgium and France.

Really?



Yes. Horse meat is big still.

Really?

Yes. In France and Belgium.

So it's a delicacy, or it's just part of the meal?

It's part of their menu. And it still is. I mean, probably not to the same extent as it was in those years, but definitely back then. And they also had-- were running a linen factory, or had co-ownership, I think, in a linen factory, which was a big object, you know. They grow a lot of linen in Lithuania. They used to, at least.

Flax. They still do.

Flax. Flax. Sorry.

It's OK.

And then they also had this farm, which was part of the family operation. And so my father was born there, grew up there, in that interesting little place, which was very cosmopolitan. It was Lithuanian, Russian, German, because it was just on the border. He grew up with three languages. He went to a German school in Stalluponen.

So that-- Stalluponen was where?

Right on the other side of the border.

So in Prussia?

In Prussia.

So he went to grammar school in Prussia?

Yes.

What language did they speak at home?

I think they spoke Russian and German. But he also spoke Lithuanian, of course. And Yiddish was also spoken. I mean, it was that kind of community. They kept kosher household. And what happened--

Did he have brothers and sisters?

Pardon me?

Did he have brothers and sisters?

No, he was a single child. What happened to him was that at age five or six, he contracted polio, and he was very sick. Twice. It came back twice. And he was cured.

My grandmother took him to all kinds of resorts, took him to the best doctors all over Europe, in Germany and in Belgium or wherever, to get him the best treatment. And he recovered, but he had lost all muscles in both legs, from the knee and down. So he walked with a limp all his life.

And that's how you remember him too, walking with a limp?

Yes, of course.

OK.

He was not-- because of that, he was not capable of heavy physical work. But he then grew up there. Then of course he has described what happened during the Civil War.

You mean 1918?

After the revolution, they fled. They went to Ukraine. They were refugees for a long time. They went--

Where did they flee? [INAUDIBLE].

Well, because they were-- they couldn't stay. It was-- there were pogroms, and there were all kinds of riots. And for safety reasons, they went to the Caucasus, stayed at some resorts. They were-- I mean, they could afford doing that. My grandfather was a merchant of-- in the czarist Russia, they divided merchants in different degrees.

So he was a guild member?

A guild. He was a member of the Supreme Guild, which was very rare for Jewish merchants. And so he experienced a lot of dramas. And then of course there were World War I, which also affected the-- I mean, he has described all-- he went all through-- this was part of his growing up.

Yes. Clearly. He was born in 1906, yes.

Exactly. So. And they got caught up, actually, during World War I. They were in Copenhagen, on one of those tours, visiting doctors and resorts. They had been in Germany or whatever. So they came back to Lithuania via Sweden or whatever.

Then they were able-- after the Civil War, I think around 1921 or '22, when Lithuania regained its independence--

1918, yes.

'18. But they came back, I think, a little later. They were allowed to repatriate as former citizens of and residents of the area. I mean, they were Russian citizens at that time, of course, during the Russian-- the czarist rule.

But they were allowed to come back. And they came back, and they re-established their business. And it again became a very successful operation. And then my father then went--

Did he go to college?

He went to a university in Leipzig and graduated as an economist in the '20s. Didn't my brother tell you that?

It doesn't matter.

OK, it doesn't matter. OK. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS]

So and then he graduated, I guess in the early '30s or something. Let me see. Yeah, it could be early '30s.

But he meant -- Really went through a German school system.

He did.

If he went through primary school in Germany and then college in Germany, he was--

Yes. He was absolutely fluent in German and knew German literature and history and culture, in, out. And what happened then, his father died in 1934, I believe. And then he had-- his dream was to become a journalist. He wanted to be a journalist when--

Funny how his son turned out to be-- [LAUGHS]

So-- [LAUGHS] so that was his dream and aspiration. But then when his father passed, passed away, he had to go back to the business and take over the business operation.

And so that meant horse trading.

That business-- exactly, exactly, to be in charge of the operation of the business. So he went back to Kybartai. And then he started traveling with the-- because of the business. He went to France, Belgium, Copenhagen. They sold a lot of workhorses to Denmark. And that was another lucky strike, because during one of those visits, he met my mother, in Copenhagen.

Tell us about that.

In 1934, the year of my grandfather's death. And they met-- they met through-- as it always happens, by coincidence, they-- but in a very romantic place in Copenhagen, through common friends. They went to the Tivoli Gardens. You know Tivoli Gardens?

I've been there.

OK. So that's where they met, in May 1934. My father went with some of his Danish friends. And some of my mother's friends had been invited, and they took my mother along, and they met. And it was love at first glance, apparently.

And they started dating. He came back to Copenhagen probably more frequently than required by the business operations. And they got engaged, and then they married in 1935.

My mother's family had settled-- or my mother's mother had settled in Copenhagen, had come to Copenhagen in 1908 or 1909. She was born in Belarus.

Your mother? Or your grandmother.

My grandmother. In the Vitebsk region, Chagall country.

Oh, really?

[LAUGHS] In another shtetl. And she had married and left with her husband during the pogroms there in 1907 or something, and they went to Liverpool. I'm sure I don't know.

That is not part of the established knowledge in the family history, but they went to Liverpool with-- my thinking is-- with the intention to go to America. There was nothing that tied them to Liverpool. There were no relatives, nothing.

Well, Liverpool was that station where everybody--

And Liverpool was one of those harbors there from where many immigrants of those years went to America. So I think that's what happened. But then-- and then my mother and her twin brother were born.

In Liverpool?

In Liverpool. And then when they were infants, a few months old, their father committed suicide.

Oh my goodness.

He was a joiner, a cabinetmaker. And she never learned from her mother why, what happened, what had transpired. It was-- it's one of the family secrets, why. He was a young man. He must have been in his late 20s or mid 20s and committed suicide.

And then my grandmother was left there with the two infants. What happened was that she picked up the two babies and went across Europe, back-- back, so to speak-- in any case, eastward, to Copenhagen, where some of her relatives, uncles, aunts, cousins, from that place in Belarus, had come and settled. That was the only place where she had relatives. And that's how--

Your mother came to be there.

So that's, I guess-- she was born in November, November 1, 1908. So it could have been late 1908 or early 1909 that they came, settled, and then the Danish life of the family started. So she grew up there as a Danish girl.

She didn't have any memories of England at all.

No, no. She was a few-- she was an infant. You know, she was a few months old.

What citizenship did she have?

She had British citizenship.

She had British citizenship. Did that--

Until late in life. I don't know when she got-- I think when my father met her, she still had--

British citizenship?

British citizenship.

OK. What was her life like in Denmark? Did she ever tell you?

Oh, she did. And they have all-- she has been-- she has described it a lot. She was a good storyteller, like my father. And she grew up in very modest-- in a very modest family. Her mother was a tailor.

She remarried after some years to another Jewish tailor from the same part of the world, from-- I think he was from Belarus. So she grew up with a stepfather and then three other siblings who were born into the family later on.

And she-- it was a totally different family background and a totally different social setting than my father's growing up in that well-to-do family in Lithuania.

Yes. There's the irony, is that in Denmark, it sounds like it's not so well-to-do, and in Lithuania, quite rich.

Well, but I guess the living standards in the two countries were--

Well, they're different.

Were different. But maybe not as different in that period as they were later on in the century. But in any case, these-- my

mother's social setting, they were still immigrants. They were poor. They lived in very modest-- under very modest circumstances.

They were not well taken care of by the Jewish community, the established Jewish community. They were kind of looked down upon, like the other-- you know, there was a Jewish aristocracy in Copenhagen who had been there for centuries. They were of Spanish and Portuguese origin, who had immigrated in the 17th century or 18th century, had settled there, where these [INAUDIBLE], or some had come from Germany.

And they did not mix well with the new waves of the poor, the proletariat Jewish, immigrants, east-- they were looked down upon. In any case, but she grew up. She got an education. She went through-- she went to a Jewish school and got an education.

She worked as a secretary. And then she met my father. And it was love. And they married in 1935. Went on a beautiful-- as I understand-- honeymoon through Europe, Brussels, Paris, whatever. My mother always recalled it fondly. And then settled in Kybartai.

Which was a different world for her.

Totally different. First of all, it was a small provincial town. But as I said, a totally different social setting. It was a very wealthy family compared to what she had come from and what she had to live with her mother-in-law [LAUGHS] in the same house, which I think may have been a bit complicated.

But I think it was a very happy, in general, situation. She got pregnant. My brother was born in February 1936. They traveled. They--

His name? Your brother's name?

My brother's name is Shneur which is a little anecdote, here. My mother thought it was a very weird name. It's-- she had never heard that name. It's an old biblical name that maybe is used in Orthodox Jewish communities.

Were your parents Orthodox?

Well, they had a-- they kept a kosher household, but they were not very religious, as such. Not strictly Orthodox. Part-- the reason for that name was that my grandmother insisted that this should be his name, my brother's name, because our grandfather's name was Shneur

And he came from-- our great-grandfather was a rabbi, I think, or a-- the only picture we have of him, he is the picture of a Hasidic Jew. And I think his name was either Yehuda or Moses. I mean, there were two of those names in--

In the family.

In the family. And so I think that is the-- my mother wanted to call my brother after her father, Harry. But that was out of the question, so. And she said, but this is a very difficult--

What does Shneur think?

[LAUGHS] Well, listen what happened. So when he was born, my grandmother started calling him-- when he still was in the cradle, he started calling him Bubi. You know, this is the German-- [LAUGHS] German-influenced pet name for babies, Bubi.

And my mother said, well, watch out. Don't do that. That will cling. That will stick to him for the rest of his life. No, no. It's only while he was a baby. Now he's pushing 80, and he's still Bubi. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS] Funny.

So this is what happened. They lived there. They traveled, they were happy. They had there, sort of, I guess, the usual family issues, like the tensions or friction between my mother and her mother-in-law. And then there was an interesting - another interesting intermezzo.

In 1939, they decided to-- they went off on a trip. They-- I don't know the exact itinerary. But they went to Denmark to visit my mother's family. They went to Sweden. There were other European destinations. But in the summer of 1939, they ended up in Sweden.

Wow, that's quite a summer.

They spent a long summer in Europe. And my father was directing the business sort of by remote control.

Without the internet.

[LAUGHS] Without the internet, but they had phones, of course, already then. And his mother had stayed back in Kybartai, and they had staff. So he was doing it from afar. So they come to-- they arrive in Sweden. They spent all summer in Sweden.

Because, as they have explained in their memoir, they felt that the situation was a little unclear in Europe and unsafe. And my mother had a sister who had married a Swedish-- had a Swedish husband and lived in Gothenburg. So they stayed with them, and they stayed in other places in Sweden while-- what was happening in the summer of 1939 in Europe. So they decided it was a bit unsafe, so they stayed. Remarkably then, in November 1939, my father decided it's safe enough to go back.

November?

November '39.

After the war starts? So they're there while Mr. Molotov and Mr. Ribbentrop sign their pact.

They had signed the pact. The war was raging in Poland, just around the corner. I don't know what made my father think that it was safe.

He was kind of the cosmopolitan intellectual. He listened to the BBC. He read the international press. He was well informed. You know, the aspiring journalist. He followed the news, as he did all his life, all his life.

So he was well informed. And I have never-- I-- it's only late in life that I really got aware of the strangeness of this decision of his. And my mother was resisting it. And she has-- and they had little-- you know, I co-wrote their memoir, so I know exactly what transpired between them. And she was-- by intuition, she was against it.

She felt it in her bones.

She felt that this was a wrong, a fatal decision to make. But she was overruled. My mother-- my grandmother was putting a lot of pressure on my father, calling him back. Because also the business was very-- they had a lot of activity in the business. You know, all the products from the flax, there was a huge demand.

They also produced what do you call it? Hmm, that kind of material that you use to cover cars and trucks, the kind of-- not-- oh. Anyhow--

Upholstery for the seating [BOTH TALKING]

No. It was more-- actually, it has military use.

Tarps?

No, it's canvas.

Ah, of course. That could be done. Yes, canvas.

There was a big demand for that kind of product, so. And the horses probably, too. And she put a lot of pressure on my father to come back.

So they went from the safest place in Europe.

In the world-- in Europe. So in November 1939, they embarked on a-- they get onto a train, go to Stockholm, embark on a ferry, and go to Riga, and by train, go back to Lithuania and Kybartai.

The border town between Prussia--

I mean, it was the craziest thing. And my mother has said that she cried all the way.

Poor baby. Now--

She felt this was a fateful, fatal decision to make. So. But that's--

Well, did she ever-- when your parents were in Siberia, was it something that was between them? Because the--

It did surface. It did surface. Also while we were working on the memoir. You know, there was a kind of what did I say sort of mechanism in their relationship. Didn't I tell you. Because it was, you know, they could easily have stayed. They could have sold the business. They could have had his mother join them.

Because at that time, people were still able to leave Lithuania. There were people who left, went to Hong Kong, to Shanghai, to Australia. So they could easily have united, you know, not have left her behind. It was a fatal mistake. I think my mother was very gracious.

And your father, did he ever express guilt? I mean, I can't imagine the guilt he must have felt.

I think he did, in his own manner. But he was a very proud man. And but the thing is that I have understood this, the context and the substance of this decision, very late, while I was working with some of the material. Now I'm actually working on a book about the Cold War.

And the Molotov-Ribbentrop, I go back to the Molotov-Ribbentrop. And I mix it with some of the personal history. And I mean, so these are things that-- and I started wondering, why-- how could he do this. The only thing from my point of view, the only other element that is in his defense is that had they stayed in Sweden, I probably wouldn't have been sitting here, because I would not have been born. [LAUGHS] They would have had many other children, probably, but not me.

Or other children and you.

Well, that's--

You never know.

That's--

But I want to say something.

--an assumption.

This reminds me. In your father's defense, in your father's defense, I mean, it's-- you say he was well read. He looked-- he listened to the news. He was well informed. There was a diplomat that you probably have heard of, a Japanese diplomat in Kaunas.

Yes, I know--

Chiune Sugihara.

Yes.

And it was he who supplied many of the exit visas for Jews who either came from Poland or from Lithuania--

I know.

--and so on. Well, I remember reading someplace that as the diplomat, he was privy to information that the public would not have, even well-read public. And he visited some of the Jewish families in Kaunas before the events got really bad.

And people were talking to him in the same way, with the same issues that your father would have had, about what do we do with the business. How do we deal with the business. How can we leave, because we have the assets. How do we-- and so on.

And his thinking to himself of this Japanese diplomat. And what he would try and mildly say is that in a few months, this won't matter. The businesses won't matter. But he could not say why.

Yes.

He was not able to say why, no matter what he might have known.

Well, there is a general-- I agree. It's a very valid point. And there is also a general issue here. We are-- in most situations and cases, we are blind to our present time. We don't see what is coming just around the corner.

It just happened last year. You know, who would have anticipated that Russia would invade Crimea and annex Crimea and start a war in Ukraine. So by the same token, it looks obvious today, 70 years later or more, 75 years later, that this was a terrible mistake, to go back to Lithuania from a place like Sweden. It may not have been that obvious back then.

Although the war was raging. Hitler was killing Poles, Christians, and Jews in masses. Stalin and his troops were tearing Poland apart just on the other side of the border.

The deportations were already going on in Poland.

They were-- of Polish citizens were already. Polish refugees came to Lithuania.

Did any of them come to Kybartai, do you think?

I don't-- they never told me about it. But they told-- they have-- some German refugees came to Lithuania. And one lady stayed with them, actually. A friend of theirs. She was left behind.

Her daughter and her daughter's family went to Australia. And for some bureaucratic reason, there was some problem with her passport, and they decided, well, that this will be fixed, and she would be able to join them at a later point. She never did.

This was a German Jewish lady?



Yes. So--

She could have ended up in that trench.

Yes, probably she did. So--

So they come back in November--

They came back in November '39, and they picked up where they had left. My father started doing, you know-- and probably my mother got pregnant a little later. My sister was born in September '40. So I mean, she got her pregnant a few months later.

And they probably assumed that they could start-- pick up where they had left, a regular life, until then the Soviets-- the consequences then, as the Soviets started executing on the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement.

But before that, I want to--

They started with the bases, you know--

Well, tell us about that then.

Yes. But I mean, the first thing that happened was that the Russians claimed first-- I think first in Latvia or Estonia that their interests-- they were not able to control the situation. There were some violations. They had some pretext, some excuses. And they twisted the arms of the Baltic states, governments, and made them agree to allow Russian troops to come into the-- first Latvia and Estonia, then Lithuania. With bases, they spread all over.

Military bases.

Military bases. And then that was the beginning of the end of their independence. Because then that lead in 1940, I believe, to--

Annexation?

Annexation. A full annexation of the three Baltic states. In between, we had the Finnish Winter War. They did the same thing down in Romania with Bessarabia, Moldova.

Moldova. Which is a problem to this day.

Still a problem, of course. So the situation changed drastically. And everything was-- what happened was that my father's business was nationalized.

That's what I wanted to ask.

Everything-- they lost everything they owned. He was a capitalist. He was categorized as a-- if not an enemy-- that was the worst category, an enemy of the people. But as we found out much later, many years later, a socially unreliable element.

So that's a little bit less bad.

They had to evacuate their house, move out. They were moved into an apartment. And that was the beginning of their odyssey there. Then started-- then, you know, one year later.

In this time, just describe for us very briefly what you were told about their living circumstances before everything was

nationalized. Were-- could-- is it fair to say that they were one of the wealthiest families in Kybartai?

Yes. They belonged to the-- I have looked a little at the sort of social and demographic history of Kybartai, and it had a substantial Jewish population, and they belonged to the upper class and the well-off, socially well-off families. They were in different kinds of businesses.

The thing that was advantageous with the location of Kybartai was that it was on the railway station, on the railway going west, coming from Russia. And so it was--

Great trading.

It was good for trading and export businesses. So there was a concentration of that kind of businesses in different spheres. And I believe-- although, I mean, I haven't really made any comparisons. But I can say that they were-- they led a comfortable life.

Where did--

They had help. They had staff.

They had a car?

They had a car.

They had a telephone?

Yes.

They had a-- all these things which aren't given in Eastern Europe.

No. They-- my father, he couldn't-- he didn't drive, but he had a driver for the-- they had a Buick.

Wow.

Yes, that was something. No, they definitely-- I think they were a well-off family, and led, as I said, a comfortable life that allowed them to travel. And I think it was not either common to have staff, have maids, have a cook or whatever, the driver. So yes. I think that's fair to say.

So that meant they lost this.

Everything.

They lost this and--

Everything.

And they had to move out of the house?

Yes. It was a big house. It's still standing. It was-- now there are four or five families in that house.

And the-- you started to describe, when we first started to talk, about the deportation itself. How did they-- do you remember them telling you about this early on?

Yes. It's part of the family history and family mythology, family narrative, maybe, more appropriately. And of course when I was working with them on their memoirs, I interviewed-- we started by first, I interviewed them and did the first

chapter or two as a test. And then when I started working in 1974 for Danish broadcasting, I didn't have much time. And then it came to a halt.

And then my father retired. He was a teacher in high school. He was teaching German and Russian in high school. Then I pushed them to start writing on their own.

And then a few-- the year after he was retired, I moved as a correspondent to Moscow. And then they kept-- I pushed them to keep writing. And then they sent these scripts to me in Moscow, and then I worked with them, with the scripts when I came to Copenhagen. So I know the story both from their stories, their own accounts, and from working that quite intensely with the material.

So tell us again-- I know it's a bit of a repetition-- what happened on June 19-- no, June 14.

14th.

14th.

The way that my parents have described it was that early in the morning, there was a knock on-- somebody knocking on the door. And they-- and they were staying in that apartment. They were not staying in their house anymore.

That's right.

And they went and opened and outside was three persons, or three Soviets in uniform.

Did they know them?

No. They-- and one was sort of in military uniforms. And they called them a troika, armed. And they were very rude. And they told them to-- they-- the whole family should-- they told them to be in one room, on the watch, while they did a search of their apartment.

And then they were told to pack. They were allowed to take 100 kilograms of luggage with them. They were told to take--

100 kilograms is a lot.

Yes, for-- but they were three grownups and my brother-- well, he was not with them there-- and my sister. So yes. But that was the norm. Warm clothing, no valuables, no money.

And they come-- I have seen the protocol. I went back to Vilnius during one of those visits, and I saw the protocol, the NKVD protocol of what was confiscated.

So you saw their files.

I saw the files. Part of the file. It was not complete. It had ended up-- that file followed them through the deportation. And then at some point, it was transferred to Vilnius, to the KGB.

It's called the special archives.

Headquarters in Vilnius. And that's where they stayed. And then after the independence, they made them available to relatives and descendants of the people who had been arrested and were in those archives.

And I saw a list of what had been confiscated, you know, all valuables, jewelry, et cetera, et cetera, and how they were questioned. There was a protocol of how my father was questioned about his-- and how he was described as belonging to wealthy-- descending from a wealthy merchant family. And it was in Russian.

And so that's what happened. They were rude. They were-- my grandmother tried to hide some jewelry, and they saw that and were very rough with her and confiscated it on the spot.

My mother had been more well prepared. She-- her female intuition had not deceived her. She had that intuition, so she had hidden some of her jewelry in a roll of yarn for knitting. And they had a lot of-- that helped them a lot during the following years, because they could sell it.

So that-- and then they wrapped everything in bed linen, in big bundles, and take them to the truck. And then they told-- and my mother was so scared that they would not let them pick up my brother at the farm. But they did.

And they went out of town. They picked him up. And there is a description of-- my mother was scared to death when she saw it-- that one of the soldiers who accompanied went in-- or several-- and got my brother under-- you know, with the--

At gunpoint.

At gunpoint. [LAUGHS] A five-year-old kid.

Why was he at this farm?

He was staying with a-- he loved being on the farm with my-- with his-- with my father's cousin. That's--

Was your father's cousin deported?

No. He was the one who perished, as I told you. He stayed behind. He was not. He was not. He fell-- did not fall into that category. So he was left behind.

And as I said, we don't know if he was shot at the farm, whether he was one of the hundreds at the mass grave. But he vanished. He perished.

So my brother was picked up there. [PERSONAL NAME] was-- didn't understand what was going on. My mother had to tell him some fairy tales about the journey that they were going on. He couldn't--

Fathom. Mhm.

He couldn't fathom what was going on. And then they ended-- then they were taken to the station and locked up in the cattle wagons, together with all the other people. And then the German lady who was staying with them--

The one who was supposed to go to Australia?

Exactly. She was not taken. She came to the station and brought them some of their personal belongings the day after. Because they stayed there for four or five days.

In [NON-ENGLISH], you said?

In [NON-ENGLISH]. [PLACE NAME] I think that was on the station, the local station. And I was able somehow to pass these belongings onto them. And they described that she told them that-- she was crying and was very unhappy, because she was left alone, with her daughter in Australia, on the way to Australia. And she told them, as unhappy as they were-- because they didn't know what was going on, what--

No one told them why they were arrested?

No, no. They didn't tell them anything other than that they were going. And she told them, Mrs. Bauer, that probably

they were the lucky ones.

She said that?

Yes.

Wow. It's not something one would have wanted to hear in the cattle car. But.

Well, anticipation, or I would rather call it female intuition, is much--

There's something very strong there.

It's much better analytical tools than political commentary or analysis. So in any case, she was able to pass this onto them. And four or five days later, they took off.

And they describe very accurately in that book how many people there were in the wagon, under which-- you know, they were packed. There were so many people. Very primitive. You know, no sanitary facilities. There was a hole in the floor of the wagon and a curtain where people could retire for their needs.

Like a toilet, yes.

And--

Was your father separated from the family?

No.

Many fathers were.

Many-- that's what happened on the station, that many men were separated from their families and taken into a separate wagon. They never saw them again. They ended up in the Gulag camps, or they were executed. Nobody knows.

They disappeared. And of course when my mother saw that this was happening, interestingly, it was happening on both sides of the dividing lines, the same thing was happening. On the German side, how they divided families, there was not much difference in that respect.

And my mother was scared to death when she saw that some men were taken aside and separated from their families. Fortunately, it didn't happen. And so they were taken-- they were on their way, I think, for three or four-- three weeks.

And as the war started, they saw a lot of military trains going in the opposite direction. And every time, they were pushed aside to a side track, literally, and had to wait and wait and wait, until-- and then three weeks later, they ended up in Altai, in the Altai region.

Where is the Altai region?

It's in the south, southern part of Siberia, with the border-- I think China or Mongolia.

My gosh, that's far.

That's where they ended up, on a collective farm, and were told to debark, get out, and taken to-- interred in a school. And they spent a year there in Altai, working. My father worked as a bookkeeper at the collective farm.

That's not a bad job.

No. He couldn't do physical work. They saw. I mean, he was disabled. Because of his polio, he could not really work, do physical work. But he was a good economist. [LAUGHS]

Did he have any-- did your parents have any stories or any reminiscences from that time?

Yes. Many.

Well, what was it like there?

They-- there were--

This was 1941.

1941. There was a lot of uncertainty. They didn't know what their fate would be. I mean, what the purpose of this was. Nobody told them.

But they were allowed to settle, find a place to live, take the jobs they could get, and had a kind of subsistence, that they could live. They could survive. And they actually-- my father and mother, they both had this ability to establish relationships, even under those circumstances, with the local people. And there were people who really helped them from the local population with surviving.

Excuse me. When you talk about them having relationships and having this rapport, it reminded me of something I forgot to ask about the trains themselves. When they were in the cattle cars, did they recognize any of the other people in there?

Of course.

So these were--

Yes, there were many people they knew. But they were-- I mean, they were not all Jewish. There were Christians, and they knew people, and they got acquainted with other people that they had not known. But there were many people they knew from the past.

OK.

And there was-- in the train, you know, there was a certain routine with how they were given food and water, very primitive. You know, it was kind of a soup, shchi, a cabbage soup and water and bread. But, you know, they survived. But people also died, of course. And babies died, and small children died on-- during that-- in those three weeks.

And they saw this, and they--

Yes. That was part of-- this was the first part of the ordeal. People were dying. So they managed through that first year.

There was an episode that they have described that when-- in Biysk-- that was the place they were staying, Biysk, in the Altai region. When spring came, everybody started to grow their vegetables and put potatoes down for the next year's harvest. And thinking that they had to stay there, they were thinking, how should-- what should they do.

And then some of the local people-- my mother didn't-- parents didn't have the potatoes to put to-- how do you say? To-- To plant them.

To plant.

I think it's-- I don't know what part of the potato, but it's the eye. Isn't it something with the eye?

Well, normally, you have the-- you let the potatoes--

Sprout.

Sprout, and then you put them in the ground. And then the local people told them that they didn't need to have whole potatoes. They should go to the cafeteria and get some of the peels. And as long as they have three eyes in the peels, they could put them in the ground, and they would sprout, and they would become potatoes.

Really?

Potato plants. And my mother didn't believe it, and my father didn't either. They had never grown anything, I believe, other than maybe in their garden in Kybartai, or they had a gardener to do that.

But they did. And they planted those peels with the-- and they were very suspicious. They thought they were being taken for a ride. But after a while, they sprouted, and beautiful plants came out.

And they were looking so much forward to harvest time, because it became really fully blown potato plants. And they did as they were told. But of course then they never got a chance to harvest them, because then in midsummer, they were told to get-- to pack, get ready. And then they were taken on trucks again. I don't--

This would have been '42?

The summer of 1942. My sister was a year and a half old there. And yes, she was from September 1940. They were told again to pack, get on to trucks, a train. And then they were taken-- got up to the Lena River and boarded a-- how do you call it?

A barge?

A barge?

Mhm.

Under horrible conditions. A barge-- several barges that were pulled by a steamer, a steam boat, and pulled up the Lena River. And that--

So that means your mother, your father, two small children, and grandmother.

Yes. Along with everybody else. And placed in the-- how do you say? In the hull of these barges, under horrible conditions.

My mother has-- they have described this as absolutely horrific conditions. Like there's a saying in Danish, at least, that you keep them like-- they were kept like herrings in a barrel. I don't know what they call it in English.

How do you say it in Danish?

[SPEAKING DANISH]. You know--

Like sardines.

Like sardines in a can. Squeezed down under these horrible sanitary conditions. No showers, no nothing. And they had to cook on the-- it was some primitive cooking facilities on the deck. And that took-- that went on for weeks and weeks.

They were pulled up-- I mean, downstream, but up north, on the Lena River. They came to Yakutsk. Some people were

taking off. My parents had hoped that they were among them, but that didn't happen. And then that was the horrible, horrible journey up to the mouth of the Lena, up to Tiksi.

So that means close to the Arctic.

They were-- they passed the Arctic Circle, and they-- [LAUGHS] that is a fantastic description they have in their memoir, how they were looking, how the landscapes were changing. You know, they became more and more barren. They came up into the tundra, and they had no clue where they were going.

And then the Soviets, the guards, spread the rumor that they were going to be taken up to the mouth of the Lena River, and from there, they would be taken to Canada.

Oh my. Oh my.

So that people were actually, oh, well, you know. So they were thinking they were on their way to freedom. They were on their way to Canada or Alaska or-- so there would be no resistance. And people died also on that journey. And then they ended up in Tiksi. I'm--

--going.

Yeah, we'll keep going. OK. So we were in Tiksi.

Yes. Well, there was a beautiful episode, a very cinematographic episode, that I reconstructed when I shot the documentary about my parents' deportation. They were being put up on the-- to the North, down the Lena River. And there was one episode that my mother has described, that some of the people, they were-- at one day, they were-- went up on the deck, assembled there, and started singing the Hatikvah.

Oh.

Which was, of course, not the national anthem of Israel then, but became the national anthem.

It's beautiful.

And spontaneously, they got together, and they started singing. You know. And it is a pretty strong scene, because you have to imagine this barren arctic landscape tundra and these people, young men and women, as they were, in their 20s, 30s, young people getting there, standing there on the deck and singing about their--

Do you know any of the words?

--of the hope to get back to the holy country and be reunited with the-- it's sort of the Zionist song of the dream of being reunited with Israel. And so I used that in my documentary and reconstructed it as good as I could as we were sailing down the same-- we took-- we followed exactly the same route of the deportation, in more comfortable circumstances.

I had chartered us a small boat for-- I was there with my sister and my brother and the TV crew. But we did that. And we were not singing. We are no singers in the family. [LAUGHS] But so they had no idea what was going to happen. And then they ended up in Tiksi and taken further on.

So they went beyond Tiksi, or they--

They went beyond Tiksi, because they-- you go-- the-- there is a a-- what would you call it? A peninsula, a long, thin peninsula that goes from Tiksi--

And Tiksi is a town, or--



Tiksi is a town. It was a military town, and it was also-- until the collapse of the Soviet Union, it continued to be a military base. But they were taken to the tip of that peninsula. It's called [RUSSIAN].

And there, at the end, at the very end of it, there was a fishing village, Bykovsky. Bykovsky, it's called. And that's where they had to disembark. And it couldn't go-- they were taking in boats--

From this barge?

From the barge, in small boats, and taking in to land, to the shore. And then they were resettled onto another barge that was on the--

The water?

Yes, but it was on the shore. And then they lived there for weeks.

On this other barge?

Yes. Because they-- there was nothing. I mean, there were houses, but they were taken. They had to build their own houses. Yurts, kind of--

What does a yurt look like?

Well, I have seen some reconstructions of it. But they had to do it with the timber that was-- they had to take out of the river. The men, the able men, had to build the yurts for the families, while they were living-- while the families stayed in that barge. It was absolutely-- I went up there. Horrible.

What does it look like? What did it look like?

I mean, it looks-- well, now it looked like a ghost town. But there were people still living there. And I can't imagine what it looked like in 1942. And it's very high up in the north.

If you look at the map and go take the line from Bykovsky and go west, you will see it's very high up the same point, the same latitude. Very high up and part of Greenland. So it was very-- it's the Arctic Sea.

And my mother, when she came there, she called it the end of the world. [LAUGHS] And I think that's a pretty fair description.

Was there vegetation there of any kind?

Well, at that time, when I was there, there was grass. There were-- we went to the cemetery. I didn't find the Jewish cemetery, but the other one, where some Lithuanians had been already and erected some memorials.

Was there stone memorials, or--

No, wooden. Wooden, you know, the typical Lithuanian memorials. From 1989, they were dated in memory of the families who had perished there or who had died there. And on some of the graves, I saw flowers, wild flowers, forget-me-nots. [LAUGHS] So there was some vegetation, and there were some birds, but it was really, really wild and cold. We were there in late July, August. It was bitterly cold, like here. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS] I am sorry [BOTH TALKING]

And so, you know, strangely enough, there was a barge when we were there in 1999, when I came back with my siblings on that-- to shoot that documentary. There was a barge of that same description.

Oh, really?

Yes. Still on the shore.

What did it look like, that barge?

It's huge. Built of a very heavy wood, very long. Now it was, of course-- it is still-- you know, it was not-- it had not fallen apart. We could walk on it. And--

And it was the same kind of barge that your mother--

I believe it could even be the same barge. Because if it was made out of larch, which was the normal, the most used building wood for houses and boats, it is very strong. It could have remained there from those years. I looked upon it as a Gulag monument. It didn't-- I couldn't make it talk though, so I couldn't get-- nobody was--

You couldn't get it to listen to you.

And nobody there was able to tell me anything. It was a horrific place. It was a ghost town. But there were people. And you know, I went to that cemetery and saw something really horrible. Because it's right on the edge of the ocean. And apparently, during storms, the waves are washing out the-- what do you call? The edge. It's kind of steep. Go-- ravine--

The cliffs and the--

No, it's soil and permafrost. And it was ghastly, to say it frankly. Because some of the water and the erosion ruined the graves, so the bodies and the remains were washed out of the graves. And because of the permafrost, the bodies didn't disintegrate.

So it was terrible. And the dogs came and took body parts and strew them around. And we saw a skull in downtown Bykovsky-- if you can call it-- not in the-- not at the cemetery. It was horrible.

And then I asked the locals if that was what happened. And they said, yes, yes, yes. This is what happens all the time. They-- I was told by some of the Lithuanians who had come back, who had lived there much longer-- my parents only stayed there for a little more than a year, then they were allowed to go down to Yakutsk.

But some of the other Lithuanian deportees, Jewish and Christian families, they stayed there much longer. And now I have-- when I established contact with some of them, they have created a community, a society of people, of the deportees. And some of them came back to that exact-- there were other places. It was not only-- there were other places in the area, with other Lithuanian and other Polish and Finnish communities. And some of the Lithuanian families and descendants came to bring back the remains and the coffins with their parents or mothers and bring them back to Lithuania.

And one story was that a daughter came back to-- that I was told. I didn't speak to her myself. But it was told to me by one of my Lithuanian friends that she came back to bring back the coffin of her mother. And they found the grave. They opened the grave, and she saw her mother. She was there like she was buried yesterday, because of the permafrost.

And she could see that her mother was younger than she was now, when she-- because she was so well preserved. And she said that she had frost in her hair.

Oh, wow.

It's incredible images and stories. [LAUGHS] But that's part of the history.

Wow. What did your-- once those yurts were built, people transferred from the boat?

Well, remember, this is only a second hand-- you know, I--

I understand.

I was not even--

Alive yet.

Not even an idea at that time. So this is what I have heard from others, what I have read, what I've heard from my parents. So.

And what you saw when you went there.

And then what I saw, of course, when I went back and rediscovered-- retraced the route of their deportation, tried to see this and experience this with my own eyes, as a grownup, and not just by hearsay from what I had heard during my growing up and later on in my life.

The barge, the way I imagine a barge, is something that is flat, that doesn't have depth to it.

No, it does.

It does.

Yes.

Could you describe that? Because I've come across this description--

It was-- yes. No, yes, I have pictures of it, of course, that I could share with you if you are interested. And you should see my documentary.

[LAUGHS] I'd love to. I'd love to.

I have an English version, actually. I should--

Yes.

I have promised some other people too. I forgot who. But I should-- I mean, parts of it would be interesting for you to see.

It's-- the barge, it's a ship.

It's a ship. It's not just a flat thing.

It's not-- it has a hull. Because they-- it was meant for transport, probably of transportation of goods, not human goods, but then was adapted to transporting people. So it has a hull, where you can load it with stuff.

And so people would be down in the hull?

Yes. And probably they had some kind of sleeping-- what do you call them?

Bunks or something?

Bunks.

OK. Does that mean that there was also-- they weren't exposed to the open air? That is, there was a covering [BOTH TALKING]

Yes. There was a deck. They were under deck.

They were under deck. OK.

And it's a huge structure and very-- I took some souvenirs, some nails, huge iron nails. They were immense. And so were the planks that the barge was built of.

So once your parents--

Heavy, heavy, heavy, heavy structure.

Once people built their yurts and then moved into them, what were they supposed to do at that corner of the world, up north in the arctic?

Well, they were supposed to work. They were brought there as cheap labor. This was a plan conceived by the Gulag administration to have cheap or free labor.

And of course the need for labor was bigger at that point, because so many able men had been mobilized and recruited to the Soviet Army. So there was-- all men were gone. And then they brought up this-- the mass of people, women, old people, children, and disabled men who were not able to do any work, like my father.

But then there were, of course, younger people and more physically fit people who did work, and they were used in the fisheries. So I mean--

So what kind of work were they doing?

They were fishing.

They were fishing.

They were fishing.

Up there in that--

Yes. Summer and winter. They also fished under ice. There were special-- there was a special method that they could pull nets. There were very rich fish resources.

Does that mean people got to eat?

Well, yes. They were allowed to-- they were given the ration-- everything was rationed, but they were allowed to keep some of the fish for their own provision. But the purpose, the official purpose of this mad idea was to bring these people up there for-- as labor.

And so they fished winter and summer, and then there was a fish factory where they had to process the fish. And my father got a job at the fish factory as an accountant. So he kept the accounts, and the director, the manager, the CEO or whatever you would call him [LAUGHS] of the fish factory hired him as an accountant.

Again, his education and his skills as an economist, it turned out to be a very versatile education that he had gotten in--

Leipzig.

In Leipzig, because he always liked to joke that he could use it-- he worked as a carpenter and as an agronomist, and as an accountant, and as a teacher. You know, he adapted incredibly--

That's amazing.

--and was able to provide for the family throughout those years, 16 years, in all those different places. But there they-- people worked.

Did your mother and grandmother work?

No. No. And I guess my brother must have told you that they tried-- they created a small Jewish community. They tried to keep some resemblance, maintain some resemblance of Jewish life. Some people actually stayed kosher throughout all those years.

How could you do it?

Well, you know, fish and fish--

And more fish.

And more fish.

And more fish.

And when they came down South, they could have their own chickens. We also kept chickens, of course. And they could slaughter them in a shechita, like you have-- you must, as an observant Jew, there's a certain way you-- but they could do that with the chickens. So they kept chickens and otherwise. They-- there were families who did that.

But they survived. But people got sick. They got scurvy. Was very-- many people suffered from scurvy. My father contracted scurvy. And no vegetables. No sun, no light, no-- you know, there were 72 days of polar nights in the--

Were there suicides, from what they told you? Your parents told you?

I don't-- I have-- probably there-- from Bykovsky and the Bykov -- year I-- they didn't mention that. There were suicides later on, suicides that I also remember, at least one case from my family--

I want to know about that, please.

From a family-- in a family that was-- we were friends with. I don't--

You don't recall hearing?

I have no recollection. My parents didn't talk about it. Probably the people who you will meet in Israel, that I told you about, who lived there as kids, they will be able to tell you if that was something that happened, which I think is very likely.

Well, yes. I would think so too. But the interviews that I've had so far, people have told me that nobody committed-- that people died, but there weren't suicides.

I haven't heard. My parents didn't mention from Bykovsky. And I know only of one case which was very close to us, a family-- one case from all those years. So yes. My father contracted scurvy and got all the symptoms, with swollen legs and teeth problems.

And luckily, they were able to get permission to go down-- when the navigation started on the Lena, the director of the

fish factory helped him with getting permission for him and the family to go down to Yakutsk, to the South, so to speak. And they left that summer, and they came down. They were stopped then in one of the towns on the Lena.

This would have been the summer of '43.

'43. And they were not allowed to-- there was something wrong with the papers. The authorities questioned the papers and the permission to go to Yakutsk. And you have to remember, it's in the middle of nowhere.

We stopped at that little town where they were not allowed to move on from. And but the local people then-- it was lucky, because the local people taught my mother that the way to cure my father's scurvy was to go out and pick some wild plants with a very high content of C vitamin. They were very sour. It grows all over the place.

My mother had no idea, of course. But the local people taught her. And she did, and my father started chewing and eating those plants, and it was cured very, very quickly, which was folk medicine applied. And the therapy worked.

And so what happened then was that they finally ended up-- there with some dramas on the way. They were separated. My father and grandmother stayed-- they were separated. That was the end of the navigation season. And my mother and the two kids were-- stayed on the boat. And my father and grandmother were left behind, with the risk that they would not reunite before the navigation would start again in May '44.

Wow. Did that happen?

No. Luckily, they were only separated for three or four weeks and reunited. They did get another chance to get on board a boat, and then they moved out and came back to Yakutsk. And they were staying with some friends. They found each other, and they stayed together.

And that's-- then they stayed in Yakutsk for another year. My grandmother died then, in 1944, in Yakutsk.

Of what?

Of-- I don't know the word in-- the medical problem in English. When your intestines get--

Twisted?

Twisted.

I don't know it either.

That's what happened to her. And she died after a very short time and was then buried in the Jewish cemetery. And the same year, some months later, they were again approached by the-- I mean, the conditions there, as they came to Yakutsk, I mean, I don't think they had to do that, to register with the NKVD in-- Bykov -- in the-- there was nowhere to go.

Maybe the NKVD didn't want to be there.

They were. But in Yakutsk, they had to register every week or every two weeks with the NKVD and go in and get their paperwork signed that they were still there. And then one day, they were told they had to pack. And then they were taken to Pokrovsk.

And Pokrovsk is where you were born.

Pokrovsk is 80 kilometers south, on the Lena River, south of Yakutsk. And no explanation. Just go. So they were taken, and they were then resettled at a place, a plant. You know, an agricultural center.

Was it like a research facility?

A research facility under the Ministry of Agriculture, of the Soviet Ministry of Agriculture.

Directly or through Yakutia, through the Yakutia?

Probably through the Yakutsk branch. But it was under the Ministry of Agriculture. And it was an experimental station where they tried to cultivate different plants that could grow in these growing conditions, a growth period of three months, virtually.

Now you're saying you had moved South. But South is relative.

Relative, yes.

So Yakutsk, and then this Pokrovsk. Where would they be, let's say, if we took the line, the latitude, would they be in Canada, in Alaska, in--

No, it's not as high as Alaska, up high North. It's under the Arctic Circle. It's south of the Arctic Circle. But very harsh climatic conditions, because it's sort of the archetypal continental climate, with temperatures falling down to-- I mean, on a regular basis, during the winter period, down to minus 50 degrees Celsius. It is, I tell you, very cold. [LAUGHS] Minus 50, minus 60.

It's very close to the Cold Pole in-- Oymyakon, it's called, in the mountains, some hundreds-- well, maybe more, 500, 800 kilometers north of Yakutsk. The Cold Pole of the world, where temperatures around minus 70 degrees have been measured. So Yakutsk was no--

Southern resort?

Climate paradise. Very, very tough climatic. It was better in Pokrovsk, a drier climate, but of course also very, very cold. Very cold in the winters and very hot in the summers. It could get up to 30 degrees plus--

That's in the 90s.

Yes. In the summers. But very dry. So you had a span of 80 to 90 degrees Celsius between winter and summer. But the point here is that this agricultural center, they did all kinds-- they tried to grow, develop tomatoes and all the potatoes that could grow in this very brief growing period.

And so my father was hired there. They were-- they had to settle there in that center. And then again, my father struck a very good relationship with the director, with the manager of that center, that gave them a place to live and a job as an accountant, a bookkeeper, and also as a tomato expert, as my father loved to say, where he actually worked with some of the agronomists in developing these. And that's where I was born.

And so they were there for several years before your birth? For three or four--

Well, from '44 until '49, I think. I was born in '47, while they were living there.

So do you have any early memories of Pokrovsk?

Of Pokrovsk, certainly. But not of the agricultural center. I was too young. I think we moved there when I was a few years old, in '49.

You moved out of Pokrovsk.

But they moved because my father had already, while he was living there at that place, he was given a job as a teacher

of German and English at the local school.

How ironic. [INAUDIBLE].

Yes, but he taught German and English. And they, you know, there were not many German teachers or English language teachers. And so-- and that school was down in the village, maybe two kilometers from the agricultural center.

And then at some point, they were given an apartment in a house that belonged to the school, kind of a teacher's building. And then we moved out there. And my earliest memories are from that place.

And so--

From the age, I guess I was three, four years when--

What did it look like, this place?

It was a wooden structure, built of very primitive-- built of large beams, very solid, but very primitive. And we had two rooms. We had about 30 square meters.

Total.

Yes. Two rooms. Sort of-- they were together, but through the house. But 30 square meters for five people. And it had an oven. And then there was a collective, as they used to say, kitchen.

And that's where I grew up. And that's-- my first memories are from--

Are from there.

--from there. And it had a beautiful location. It was right on the edge of a very steep shore, going down directly to the Lena River. And the Lena River, it's a big river. And there was-- it was about nine kilometers wide at that point.

Nine kilometers wide?

Yes, yes. It's really big.

So you don't see the-- you have big rivers in America too, but I mean, some of the Russian rivers are immense. And Lena is one of the five or seven biggest rivers in the world. And at that point, where we were staying in Pokrovsk, it was nine kilometers wide. And the view from-- and our house there-- our house. The place there was right on the edge, going down to the river, quite steep.

Could you see the other shore?

No. We could see an island. It was-- there were islands between the shores. So we could not see the other side of the river. But it was beautiful. And we had a prime location.

Wow. Yes, riverfront.

Riverfront.

Riverfront.

So the house didn't have any roof. So it was flat.

What was it covered with, the?



Earth or clay. And then we had our own stove, a brick stove that we, you know, heated the rooms with, with the firewood in the winter. And had, of course, no running water, no toilet. The water supply was a wooden barrel in the summer that was standing in front of the house, that we went out.

There was a water guy who came and filled it a couple of times, maybe once a week or whatever. And we used it both for drinking-- I mean, everything was boiled. My mother was very, very careful. Everything was boiled, nothing-- but we used it for washing. And in the winter, the water supply were ice blocks that were carved out from the river and brought up and allocated to each household.

So each household had their ration of ice blocks?

Yes. And then you--

Chip away.

Chipped away for your needs and melted the ice.

Wow.

[LAUGHS] And another-- then we had, close to the house, there were some outer spaces, storage, where we kept our winter supplies one of the most important staples was sauerkraut, as what we call sauerkraut. This is the Russian variety of salted cabbage that every family prepared in the winter. That was also a collective thing that everybody did together in the village, in the town.

I read an article from, I think The New York Times, where you talk about your sauerkraut making?

Exactly. Oh, you did some research.

[LAUGHS] I did.

Yes, I still do that. And my brother does that. Didn't he tell you?

No. Well, if he did, I didn't remember that part.

No, we still do that. And it's a very simple-- my recipe is very simple. I can give it away. It's 2% salt.

2% salt, and the rest cabbage.

With carrots.

With carrots.

You cut it very thinly, you know, you slice it and cut it. And then you add 2% salt to a kilogram of--

Shredded cabbage and carrots.

Yes. And then you put it under pressure, and that's it. And then leave it alone, and it will take care of itself. And keep it-- the warmer it is, the faster the fermentation starts. And the juices come up very quickly with the salt. And you put pressure on it, and then it's soaked.

And when we did it in Pokrovsk. I was a small kid, but I still remember the atmosphere of when everybody got together. Everybody helped each other. Somebody was slicing, cutting, shredding, mixing, adding the salt, pushing it down in the barrels.

And then we took it away. And then it kept us alive during the winter, because it had a lot of vitamins. We didn't have no fruit, no vegetables, of course. And the salted cabbage was the-- what saved--

A staple.

Yes. Because it was-- had C vitamin, which was vital for survival and the health. And it's good.

[LAUGHTER]

You know, in your telling, I don't have a sense of how the NKVD played a role in your lives.

Well, they didn't play a role in my life as a kid--

But in your parents' lives.

But they were a constant presence. Because my parents had to register. They were called. They were constantly under surveillance. Remarkably so, because you know, this little place, Pokrovsk, was surrounded by-- not just by hundreds and hundreds of miles of nothingness and wilderness, it's thousands of miles of wilderness. It was a small speck on the map and surrounded by forest and taiga as it's called in Russian, [RUSSIAN]. And wilderness.

So there was no way of fleeing or getting away, although there were examples. So they had to register. And every time, for instance, if my parents needed dental care, they had to go to Yakutsk. They had to go first to the NKVD, NKVD, the security police, the secret police, and get permission.

To be able to go to the dentist.

To go to the dentist. I found in the archives in Vilnius, in the secret KGB archives that was made accessible to me, I saw an application, a handwritten application from my father to the NKVD that he asked for permission to go to the dentist. And then it was-- the reply was from the office. It was also a yes, the permission granted, but as soon as he arrives in Yakutsk, he was obliged to register with the local NKVD.

So this is the NKVD in Pokrovsk, who gives him permission to go to Yakutsk. And when he gets to Yakutsk, he has to--

Yes, yes.

--sign in there.

And I think it was even stamped secret. [LAUGHS] But it's true. And I have reproduced that document in the latest edition of my parents' memoir, that came out in Danish in 1982, came out in English in '85 or '86. It was published by Alabama University Press.

But I made a new edition two years ago, and I used some of the documents from the files, from the KGB files, that I reproduced them. And one of them was also this exchange with the NKVD about my father's trip. Because he wanted-- I think he wanted to extend it and go to-- There was a-- as a teacher, he was allowed to go to a special summer vacation place.

Oh yes. They used to-- there was a system of being able, if you worked for an institute or something--

[RUSSIAN], as it's called. I think it was in the statement. That permission was not granted. And that's why I think it was-- there are many interesting documents. So well--

So you remember growing up in Pokrovsk, at the riverfront, making the sauerkraut that kept you sustained-- oh, I have many memories. I mean, I was six years old when we left in 1953, so I accumulated a lot of--

Did you start school there?

No. I-- you start at seven. So we had to leave.

Why?

My father was fired from the job at the school.

Why?

He was-- you know, just before Stalin died, in March 1953, there was this wave of antisemitic campaigns. It was euphemistically called the campaign against cosmopolitans. They were called the ruthless-- and there was the doctor's process, you know, the whole campaign with when Stalin's paranoia really came out in full. And that hit Pokrovsk, the wave came to Pokrovsk some months later, after Stalin's death.

Oh, really?

And my father was dismissed from the job, as, you know, he was an arch typical cosmopolitan. Jewish--

I was going to say, Kybartai, from what you described to me.

Exactly. So then summarily, he was dismissed as professionally incompetent or something as a German teacher, as an English teacher. He was fluent in German. He had a really good proficiency of English. But that was the excuse. So.

What are you going to do?

And then we had to break up and leave. And we packed, and we left. And then I started school the year after, in 1954, in Yakutsk, where he again started working as a teacher. Then he suddenly was not incompetent anymore. [LAUGHS]

What language did you speak with one another at home in Pokrovsk?

A mixture of Russian and German. We grew up with German as one of our languages. But my first languages were both Russian and German. My mother didn't speak Danish with us. We-- my parents spoke German with each other, so that's why we learned German. So--

At that point-- excuse me. Before that point, we went-- when we got to your birth, that's in 1947. That already means the war is over. Had they had any news of what had happened in Lithuania, what had happened in Europe? What had they heard?

I think yes. What? Pardon me?

What had they heard about what had happened during the war? Did they know of the Holocaust? Did they know of these events?

I don't think so. At least. I mean, already there, my father was listening to Voice of America, despite the jamming.

In Pokrovsk?

In Pokrovsk. And with friends, some of the other deportees. And the BBC and whatever they were able to through the jamming. And I don't think they had a full picture of what had actually happened, neither in Lithuania-- they probably did have a sense of it, but not the magnitude or the dimensions of it or the character of it until much later.

What happened, in 1947 or '46. '46. My father saw-- read a note in Pravda, the Russian party newspaper that the Danish

diplomatic mission had reopened its representation in its mission in Moscow. I think that must have been some of the most important news he ever had read in Pravda.

Because he then passed it on to my mother, and she was very happy and enthusiastic, because that gave her hope that she could somehow establish contact with the Danish authorities. And that's what happened. Because she wrote a letter in 1946, but didn't dare to mail it by regular mail, because it was dangerous trying to get in contact with [LAUGHS] a Western capitalist government if you are a special deportee.

So what happened was that my father-- that was still when they were at the agricultural center, where he was very close with the manager, Yakov Ivanovitch [? Klimov. ?] And he was an employee of the Agricultural Ministry, and he went on business trips to Moscow. And they were friends.

And when they had seen this in the paper, and my mother had written the letter, he asked this Mr. [? Klimov ?] or Comrade [? Klimov, ?] or whatever, Yakov Ivanovitch, he told him that my mother-- he knew that my mother was Danish, that she had relatives in Denmark. And then he told him she had written that letter, and she wanted to pass it on to the Danish Embassy, a representation mission, if he could take it with him.

That's a risk.

That was-- that's an understatement. That was a huge risk. And without blinking, without hesitating, he said, yes, I will do that. And he took that letter, in 1946, at the height of Stalin's terror campaign. He was a party member. He was an official. You know, he had a lot of-- he had his own family. He had a lot to risk.

He took that letter and brought it with him to Moscow. And we have no idea how he got it to the embassy, but six, five, six weeks later, my parents got a letter from the embassy.

Wow. Well, I want to--

And that established the contact. So my mother was able to reach her family in Copenhagen. She started writing them directly. And a channel opened, so that she could tell her family that they-- they had not had any contact since 1940, 1941-- that she could tell them that they were alive. That they were out there. And then they started applying for permission to go back to Denmark.

I want to stop right here. I--

Explain to people who may not understand, why was this a risk for Mr. [? Klimov? ?]

You know, had he been caught red-handed, so to speak, with a letter from a special deportee, from a deported family trying to establish contact with a foreign government, he risked a lot of consequences, serious consequences, in that period, because it was illegal. It was criminal. He was not allowed to, of course, be a go-between or be a messenger between a deported family and a foreign government.

He could have been charged with espionage, subversive activity, whatever. He risked a lot. He risked his own life and the well-being of his family. No doubt.

People were arrested and punished for much lesser crimes and violations. [? Because ?] crime is relatively speaking. So he ran an enormous risk by doing that. And it was really an act of bravery, courage, civil courage, and really an act of very humane-- of compassion.

This also speaks to something-- I wonder whether it's both human relations and geographical distance that he and your father had a relationship to begin with. If you're a party member, and you're a manager of an enterprise, it's very rare that you would come in contact with a prisoner and have a human relationship.

Yes. But there were multiple examples of that kind of act on the part of-- how should I call them? Regular Russians, not

representing the official system of repression and control, not-- I mean, yes, he was a party member. He was a high ranking official, in relative terms. And he dared to go against the grain, go against the regulations, and socialize and befriend a deportee.

But you know, that speaks to the nature of the local population. They were wonderful, warm, normal people who didn't care. And they [LAUGHS] could see, of course, that my parents were no criminals, and they had no ill intent. That they were no enemies, and that they were kind and educated people who ended up under those horrible circumstances.

And of course people like him, who, I mean, knew, of course, understood somewhat. I mean, there were thousands of people. I mean, not only people coming with that background, which was more exotic, but thousands and tens of thousands, millions of people who had become victims of the Stalin terror and suppression culture. And people like [? Klimov, ?] of course knew what was going on. I think he had no doubts about what was going on.

No illusions.

No illusions. And so-- but still, it doesn't mean that he would put his own life and the well-being of his family at risk, but he did. And that was another lucky circumstance and situation in my family's history that helped, because then started the-- that started-- in 1946, that was the beginning of the journey back to Denmark. It took only 11 [LAUGHS] years.

Oh my goodness.

But that was that heroic act that opened that door, and followed another few lucky circumstances. But that's a different story.

Well, part of the reason why I wanted to open this theme is to get a sense of when one is deported, what is the hierarchy in that new place? And your family was in many new places, in Altai, in Bykov. Bykov-- what was it called?

Bykov [RUSSIAN] Bykovsky, Bykovsky, yes.

Bykovsky, Yakutsk, Pokrovsk, and so on. In the normal centers, whether it was Moscow or Leningrad or any of the Republic, where no one was-- where people had stayed, the people very careful about who they-- what they said and who they spoke to and so on. I wondered whether this extended out to these regions, or whether or not there was-- the geographical distance meant that you could be a little bit freer, that--

No.

No.

No. That's definitely not my impression, not my personal memories, and not what I understand from what my parents told in the whole sense of how we lived. There was definitely a clear understanding all the time that there was a division between our private sphere of what happened, what transpired within the four walls of our space, our private space--

Your 30 meters.

Our 30 square meters in Pokrovsk. We had a little more space in Yakutsk, although my parents rented one of the rooms to tenants who stayed with us, different tenants through the years. Not much space.

But there was a big difference. And there was always awareness of the private sphere and the private safe space and the outside and dangerous, where you had to watch what you said and what you did, even as a kid. And I felt it-- I remember it clearly from the death of Stalin, which I have written about, actually, also.

Yes, you were six years old.

Yes. And I remember the hysterical scenes that played out among our neighbors when the news came out that Stalin had died. People went hysterical. Women were crying and tearing out their hair in their own-- from their own heads in despair, and yelling, what should we do. How can we live on. The great leader is gone.

And I was standing in the window and looking out at these crazy women, running around in the yard, in front-- in March. It was cold. They were in their dresses without sleeves. And it was-- I was amazed. And then I understood. And it was the solemn music on the radio programs. Changed the announcements.

The very somber announcement of-- I remember the voices. I remember the music. But there were no somber atmosphere in our family. We were not-- I mean, we were not [LAUGHS] partying, but there was definitely no--

Sorrow.

Sorrow or sadness. On the contrary, in my family, my parents took this as they had no doubt that Stalin was a criminal who was the cause of at least a part of the fate that they had suffered and the fate of the other deportees. So they saw this as a sign of that their lives might be changing for the better.

And while there were all these ceremonies of grief and sorrow, and the school, and the demonstrations, and the portraits of Stalin with the black ribbons. And there was-- they declared two days of-- what do you call it?

Mourning.

Mourning. There was no mourning in our family. And I cannot say that we were celebrating, but it was-- but we had to watch that my parents went to the meetings at the school for the official mourning events, et cetera, but definitely not in our family.

So I grew up with this duality that there was an outside reality, and an indoors, and our inside reality. They were very different. And of course, my parents, also in Yakutsk and Irkutsk. You watched who you were-- what you said, depending-- they were very open with their own people, other deportees. But there were cases, you know, there were provocations, and there were all kinds of--

What's a provocation in this [BOTH TALKING]

That the NKVD infiltrated families. They did-- there were some dramatic stories during those years. And people who were arrested and sent to the camps, also from among the deportees. So you had to watch all the time. And you were being watched.

So the deportees who had been co-opted by the security services to inform?

That also. That had also happened, yes. And were informants. That was not so rare, actually, in both the Christian and Jewish communities. That happened, that they recruited or tried to recruit or infiltrate.

There was a family that there were flights between Yakutsk and Alaska. Yes. And there were some aid programs. And one of the deportee families had befriended some of the pilots and had sort of-- the Russian pilots-- and taking them in. And they had family in America.

The deportee family did?

Yes. And then after a while, this pilot who had become a friend, they had told him about the family in America. And he asked once if they didn't want to send a letter. He could take a letter for them.

And they wrote a letter to their relatives, and that letter-- and that was a provocation. And the husband ended up in camp for a long, long-- for years. Because of that. And he was-- there was a trial, and he was sentenced, and he ended up in Kolyma and came back as a broken man after five or six years or whatever he got. And so no, you had to be very

careful, yes, all the time. That was the kind of environment.

And I was told how to watch, not to say anything that we had-- what I had overheard or what-- you know, we started receiving packages from my mother's relatives after they had established contact. So already back in Pokrovsk, in those years, they started receiving packages with clothes and medicine and vitamins and sometimes a toy. I got a Teddy bear from my aunt in Sweden. I still have it.

Do you really?

[LAUGHS]

Yes?

We didn't have any toys. So that was a big thing. My sister got a doll, and I got a Teddy bear. It was a big-- that was big. And so we had to be very careful about how we told about our-- that we got packages, that we had relatives in Denmark and Sweden, et cetera, et cetera. So I grew up with that education.

I think that's important for people to know. Because the deportations themselves were an unknown kind of aspect, very much.

Yes. It was-- you know, it's very important to understand that this was a part of the Gulag system, but a gray zone. My parents were not in prison. They were not behind barbed wire.

But there was an invisible fence. They were not allowed to move more than five or seven kilometers from the place where they were registered without special permission from the NKVD. So there was an invisible barrier or invisible fence that surrounded them all the time.

They were not allowed to move. They were-- but they were privileged, of course, in the sense that they were not in a camp, or they were not in a labor camp or in a prison. They were allowed to settle. They were allowed to take jobs. They were allowed to--

The fact that your father could even be a teacher.

A teacher, yes, considering-- exactly. So I think the idea of the deportation was to turn us into-- these deportees into loyal re-socialized members of the Soviet society. So they were not only allowed to, they were obliged to vote.

No kidding.

No. They were-- they had-- they were--

They voted?

They voted. Those so-called elections-- fake elections, but that was part. So they won-- and my brother became a young-- a member of--

Komsomol?

Komsomol. I and my sister too became members of the Pioneers organization. We were Soviet citizens. So it was an attempt to retrain us, re-school us and re-educate us and turn us into loyal Soviet citizens.

And one of the reasons we could not-- were not allowed to leave at the end of the deportation, when we were working-- my parents were working on getting permission to go back to Denmark, to my mother's homeland, one of the explanations was that well, my brother, my older brother, he's 11 years older than I. He was a young Komsomol. He was-- he would be recruited to the Soviet Army. He could not go. So that was the sick thinking, the sick mind of a sick

system.

It's a crazy logic.

Oh, well. [LAUGHS]

Yes. Can we stop now for a second?

We got it.

Are we OK?

Yes.

OK. So we're continuing our interview. We just came back from a break. And the last topic I believe we were talking about had to do with now the post-war years, the '50s, about the carefulness that one had to practice, both inside the family and out. And I want to take up one of the threads, and that is that letter, that very seminal letter that your mother sent to the Danish representatives in 1946. And it took them over 10 years for this letter to bear fruit.

Yes.

That is in order for your family to be able to leave.

Yes. Let me just interrupt you. You know, much later there was a term that was applied to Jewish dissidents, or in the Soviet Union, they were called refuseniks. And people who were refused an exit visa. And they waited, in many cases for a long time. Sharansky, Anatoly Sharansky is one of them. He actually ended up in prison and in camp.

But it was a generally used term. But long before that term was invented, my parents virtually were refuseniks for 11 years, because they started to apply for permission to go back to my mother's home country from around 1946, 1947, and they were not allowed to go. And that was a miracle in 1957. But it took them 11 years. So I was going to say that they were refuseniks for 11 years before the term was invented.

Yes, [? right. ?] Describe a little bit-- well, before the overall description, a question so that I don't forget it. Your mother had British citizenship. Did she ever have Danish citizenship before the war?

Well, I think it was a proforma case, a proforma matter, that she formally-- I don't know if she actually did change her citizenship while she still was a young woman in Copenhagen, or whether she kept her British citizenship for any reason. But in any case, what mattered was that the Danish authorities considered her to be a Dane.

OK. That's the key.

And it never occurred as an issue. And maybe the NKVD and the Soviet authorities never really understood that she-- if that was the case, that she was a British citizen, and that the Danes did not have any jurisdiction and could not interfere and apply for her release and her family's release and permission to go back to Denmark.

The Danes, from the very beginning, when they took on the case, considered her to be a Danish citizen by all means, and they worked on that for-- in a very, very direct and very conscious way for all those years. And it culminated, of course, in 1956, when the Danish Prime Minister, [? Hans ?] Hansen, came on an official visit to Moscow. He was the first Western head of a government who had come in on an official visit after the Hungarian rebellion and the Hungarian drama in 1956.

That was huge, yes.

So it was a kind symbolic, important, politically important visit that the Russians also paid a lot of attention to, because



they had been-- the relationship between the East and-- between the Soviet Union and the West had been frozen after that, yet another Soviet drama in central Europe. And he came, and that benefited. I mean, he had more goodwill that would otherwise be given a prime minister from a minor North European country.

And when he met with Nikita Khrushchev for the negotiations and meetings, they were-- at the top of the agenda were some trade issues and some Danish ship building. wharves were going to deliver some freezer-- I don't know what you call them in English.

Some refrigeration [? units? ?]

Yes, ships to the Soviet Union. And that they had discussed, and there were some other bilateral issues. And then before they broke up, Prime Minister Hansen said, there is one other matter, and that is the reunification of a family, a Danish woman and her family, who are-- and then he described the situation to Khrushchev, who shook his head and said, no, no. Mr. Prime Minister, we cannot discuss that kind of small family matters, individual matters, on this level, and wanted to brush it off.

And the Danish Prime Minister insisted. He didn't give up. Held onto it and kept pushing Khrushchev on this. This was a matter of-- it was a high priority, apparently.

And you know none of this back in Pokrovsk. Or Yakutsk.

No, at that time, we had moved to Irkutsk. The last year we spent in the Soviet Union was in Irkutsk. Because what happened in 1956, the restrictions on these special deportees were abandoned. You know, the thaw under Khrushchev had started. The-- you could call it the Khrushchev spring. The Russian word is the thaw.

And some of the restrictions on the deportees had been lifted. So deportees who worked as teachers, like my father did, they were allowed to move. They could not go back to Lithuania, the place from where they were deported, but they could move more freely around within the borders of the Soviet Union.

So my parents decided to move from Yakutsk to Irkutsk, to be close to the railway connection, in case they would get the permission to go back to Denmark. At that time, they have the sense that it was moving closer, through the correspondence with the Danish Embassy and my mother's family.

So we-- in September or August, one of the last boats that left on the Lena from Yakutsk, we went to Irkutsk. I saw a train for the first time in my life. I saw a banana, a live banana, for the first time in Irkutsk. And we stayed there for a year.

So when that exchange took place, we were in Irkutsk, and we had no clue. Why I can tell you about this in such detail is that one of the ministers who was in the Prime Minister's delegation-- he was the Minister of Culture-- he wrote his memoirs years later and described this episode.

And so eventually, Khrushchev gave up and said, OK, we'll take care of it. And he nodded towards Bulganin, who was sitting at the table together with the rest of the delegation. And he said, Mr. Bulganin, Comrade Bulganin will take care of that.

And then what followed was that we, sometime later, received a very long telegram, a hundred words, from the Danish Embassy, saying that breakthrough we had. Received the permission, and we could go. And that was-- I believe that was in the spring of '57, that the final-- we had received so many refusals, and then finally, that came through. That was a day of celebration.

And then in July 1957, we boarded the Trans-Siberian Railway, the Trans-Siberian train, from Vladivostok via Yakutsk and all the other cities to Moscow, and we went off and spent one day at the Danish Embassy in Moscow, boarded another train the same day. They didn't want us to stay too long. My mother didn't believe that we would be able to get out and leave before we had crossed the Finnish port. [LAUGHS]

Always this fear of the--

Absolutely. She did not trust that system a bit. So before we had crossed the border, she would not believe that it was true. And then we came to Helsinki, spent a few days there. And there were some interesting experiences, like running water, a flush toilet, a bidet, chewing gum, an elevator.

I saw an elevator for the first time in my life. Couldn't really figure out what it was [LAUGHS] until my father explained it to me. So there were many good experiences. And then we boarded a ship, a ferry or sort of big passenger ship, Ariadne, and sailed off from Helsinki, through the Baltic Sea.

And came to Copenhagen. For your parents--

And that was it.

Well, it's the end of one part of the story and the beginning of another.

[LAUGHS]

Your parents then returned to the world that they had come from, even though that world had changed. But for their children, for you, your brother, your sister, you had never known this other world.

No. My brother, I mean, he was-- he had seen it, but he was a kid, a small kid. So it was virtually new to all of us. There's one thing that I need to-- tell me. I don't know if it's interesting.

But you know, when people hear that I grew up in-- I was born and grew up in Siberia and spent the 10 first years of my life in Siberia, they look at me with pity and compassion in their eyes. And oh, poor you. That must have been horrible. And I smile. Because of course it was not a-- what you would say a very comfortable life, but--

What did it give you?

I had-- you know, I tell people, I had a happy childhood. Maybe not what you expect to hear from the child of Danish Lithuanian special deportees sent off to Siberia, but it was not-- I don't look back at it as something deprived and suppressed. I had bad experiences, among others, inevitably with antisemitism, but it was not traumatic. Basically--

Such as, for example?

Pardon me?

Could you give us an example?

Well, I mean, basically, my sense was that I grew up like other kids. And what was important was that my parents, throughout the years, were able to provide a very comfortable, safe environment at home. I never felt threatened with them.

They were able to protect us, to give us a sense of safety, comfort, love. And so although it was a hostile environment, and we had to be careful and watchful, it was not like I look back at it or felt back then as something horrible and terrible. It was part of the condition.

So it sounds like terror was not part of the experience.

Not terror in the traditional way when you say-- when you talk about terror. It was-- I grew up with the feeling of a clear sense that we did not belong here. We-- this was not our country. And then at the same time, we were integrated. I became a Pioneer.

I took the Pioneer oath when I was 10 and in third grade, like everybody else, except Vladimir Putin, who could not, who was not accepted as a Pioneer at that age, because he was such a-- what you call it? [RUSSIAN] in Russian, a thug, with really serious behavioral issues. So he was not. But everybody else--

Was.

Normally. He was only accepted in sixth grade, three years later. Another interesting biographical detail I'll give you here about Russia's president. But unlike him, I was accepted. I was-- you know. And at the same time, I knew this was all fake, that this was all propaganda. Because, you know, I had an antidote from home.

Did your parents-- when you were still in Russia, did they tell you stories of their childhood and how they came to be there while you were there?

They did. They did. And both of them. And about the life in Lithuania, in Europe. And already in Pokrovsk, we had a map of old Europe, and I learned all countries and all capitals. So there was, I would say, a European feeling and a European sense of belonging that didn't have anything to do with Siberia.

And also of course they-- my parents liked to tell about the happy years they had of travel and a comfortable life. And that was not any--

Anathema.

Anathema in the family. So that was-- so we knew. And I read a lot. I read a lot of-- already at that age, I read, of course, Hans Christian Andersen, but I also read Mark Twain. And I read Jules Verne. And I had images that were connected with a totally different cultural setting from a very young age, although I also read Russian literature, of course and grew up with Pushkin and Russian fairy tales. So but-- and that was part of my childhood.

About-- I'm writing about this now, so I can mention this to you. One of my not last, but latest memories from Irkutsk was an episode in the early summer of 1957, in the courtyard where we lived, in a separate-- sort of in the house that we rented, or some rooms we rented, rather.

We were standing outside in the courtyard, and there was a bunch of boys. And one older boy was standing there with a rifle, with a, you know, light caliber rifle. And then he said, well, let's go and shoot-- let's shoot kikes, kikes.

How would you say that in Russian?

[SPEAKING RUSSIAN].

OK.

[SPEAKING RUSSIAN]. Kikes. And I knew exactly what that meant. Sparrows were called kikes.

Oh my.

And I had heard that. That was part of the slang. And so-- and there is-- I didn't know that. I have found out why this has happened. It has a sort of popular religious explanation. It goes ages back in Russian popular religious history, why the name--

A sparrow?

Why a sparrow is called a kike. And the guys, my peers, my friends-- I don't know if they were my friends. But they, oh yeah, of course. Let's do that. So I understood that they were going out to shoot sparrows.

And I went along with the clear intention that I would try to prevent him from killing any kikes. So I had a strategy. I would go behind them, and if they saw a flock of sparrows, I would do something so to scare them away.

And I succeeded twice, until on the third time, someone turned around and saw what I did. And then this guy, [? Steepan, ?] I think his name was, looked at me and said, you get the hell out of here, otherwise, you will get a bullet in your ass like these kikes do.

And I thought this was serious, so I [LAUGHS] went. I left. But this is why that kind of memories that I brought with me to-- when we-- not that this was something that was kind of my burden, or my-- but it--

It was part of life.

It was part of life. And it was a very dramatic change of scenery from Irkutsk to Helsinki to Copenhagen. And it was, I would say, not an easy transition, because I didn't speak any Danish, I spoke German and Russian. I spoke German with my teachers in the beginning.

And but that was my background. That was-- but you know, it was not traumatic. It was still part of the experience, part of life that I had adapted to and I took for as part of the human condition, so to speak. I mean, I probably wouldn't phrase it like this as a kid. But looking back, that's how things are, how I perceived them.

Well, you had read about this Europe, this place that-- where you didn't belong where you were. You weren't of that place, of Irkutsk and Pokrovsk and so on. But then you finally arrive in a Europe that had been the place of your parents.

Mhm.

And what was it like, those first weeks and months and so on?

It was fantastic. It was-- you know, it was without comparison, without any parallel event. It was the most wonderful day in the history of the family, when we arrived in Copenhagen and arrived in the Harbor of Copenhagen, not far from The Little Mermaid, which we didn't see on arrival, with all my mother's family, relatives, friends from the past, standing there, waiting for us.

And there were flowers and smiles and laughter and tears. And it was an incredible reunion. We stayed with my mother's twin brother for the first few months, until we were given an apartment outside of Copenhagen. And it was like a fairy tale.

And I was very adventurous, so I went out on my own, very-- after a few days, I went out exploring the city. But you know, it was in itself a very special experience to discover that you have relatives, you have cousins, and you have uncles and aunts. And my grandmother was alive. And that was-- having grown up like we had in-- without any--

Extended family.

Extended family, apart from the immediate family that I grew up with, this was part of the discovery. And it was incredible. And it was, of course, for my parents, after having lived through 16 years of deprivation and suppression and persecution, it was an incredible feeling. And they took advantage of it.

And my father was again able to adapt. He was 50 years old when we came. You know? He didn't speak Danish, but he spoke three or four other-- no, four languages. He learned Danish. He started working, again in the beginning as a bookkeeper for a company, an accountant.

And then he, a few years later, he started teaching in high school, Russian and German and was able to again provide for the family and create a comfortable framework for the entire family and managing. You know, justice somehow-- how should I say? They were-- they got another-- they got a second chance. And they lived for another 40, 42 years--

Wow.

--in Denmark, you could say happily ever ever after. And until they passed away at a high age. My father was close to 92. My mother was 90. So they had some fantastic years. They traveled all over Europe.

My sister moved to-- she moved to Israel, and they visited her. And they never visited me in America since I moved to Washington, but we were in close contact all the years.

One thing they couldn't understand was that when I decided to go back to the Soviet Union as a correspondent in 1977. I had spent a year at Columbia University. And then Radio Denmark, the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, had decided to open an office in Moscow, and I applied while I was at Columbia, and I got the job.

And my mother, especially, couldn't understand. How could I go back to that country. And I explained to her that this was a professional dream of mine. I wanted to work there. I wanted to tell Danes, Danish viewers and listeners, what the Soviet Union was about. I had that strong urge.

And she said, well, listen, Samea, she called me. One thing you can be absolutely certain of, we will never come to visit you. [LAUGHS]

Yes. Yes.

So I understood that.

Yes.

And but I visited them often.

Did your family's story shape you to be who you are? I mean, I know that's a big question. But I see--

Aren't we all shaped by our family stories, one way or the other?

Some of us don't know what those stories are. And some of us don't become journalists who go back and track them. Very few people who are, let's say, the children of survivors or deportees. Many try to research, but very few have the capability of researching to such detail that they would make a documentary of it by hiring a boat that goes up the Lena. [LAUGHS]

[LAUGHS]

You know? There are few where-- how much?

[LAUGHS] I can say in that respect, I was privileged that I could do that, and I worked for an employer who let me have that opportunity. And I think, when-- during my first stint as a correspondent in the Soviet Union, this was not possible. I was able to go back already in 1979, I think.

That's pretty early.

'78.

That's pretty early though.

I went together with a-- I was going together with a colleague from The New York Times, Craig Whitney, and his wife and my wife in 1978. But then he got caught up in some conflict with the authorities and was not able to go. So I ended up going with the correspondent of the German television station, ARD, [GERMAN] and his American wife, [? Loris ?] Fisher.

And we went. And we came to Yakutsk, and we went to Pokrovsk. But I was of course not able to do any filming or doing-- not even dream of making a documentary. I was not even allowed to try to find any of my classmates or reach out.

I was at the cemetery, and I visited my grandmother's grave. And we went down to Pokrovsk, et cetera, et cetera. But then when I came back from my second stint in the late '90s, then it was a different place. It was Yeltsin Russia. And there were no limitations, actually, on foreign correspondents.

And then I took the chance. And I felt it was natural. If you can do it, do it. And of course the material, because I had worked with my parents on their memoirs, the material was close to me, not only like their part of the family story, but I had taken part in shaping the story.

And it's a good story. So it was hard to resist. If you-- I could see the drama in it. And it became a-- I made a two-part documentary, 90 minutes all together. So--

And it was retracing their deportation?

Well, it was not a film of their book, 16 Years in Siberia, it was part of retracing their deportation and also retracing the paths of my own childhood.

OK.

So I found some of my classmates. I found some neighbors that remembered my parents. And so it was-- and then, oh, there was an interesting thing. Since I knew that the archives had been opened now, I had been, during the breakup of the Soviet Union, I visited the Lubyanka. There was a small window back then, in the early '90s, when I was back on a reporting trip, where I got access to the KGB headquarters in the Lubyanka.

So in Moscow.

In Moscow. And visited. I was taken around and shown the offices and the prison, et cetera. So that was quite something. But I knew when I was going back that the archives would be more accessible. So I had-- one of the ideas I had with the documentary, I wanted to find out why the heck were my parents deported. I wanted access to the--

You hadn't had the answer. You hadn't had an official answer for decades.

They had never-- for 60 years, they had not been told. I mean, since they were deported in 1941. This is now 1999. So over 50 years, close to 60 years, this was-- we didn't know. We didn't know the official explanation.

So as soon as we arrived in Yakutsk, I went up to the Ministry of Interior. And I told him who I was, you know, what I was doing, this documentary, et cetera, et cetera. And I wanted access to my parents' files.

And they accepted my request and said when I would come back from the trip on the river, about 10 days later or whatever, that I should come back, and they would show me what they had. So I came back and went up to the-- back to the Ministry with my camera crew, camera rolling, and we were received there. And then an official came out and explained what had happened.

The files have been transferred, and they did not have them. That was long ago. They had already been transferred to Moscow. And then I was able to-- I understood that those were the files that were in Vilnius.

But the only thing that they had been able to find were the identity cards from my parents and my brother, and they showed them to me. And I took pictures of them. And they also had-- an official had prepared an official certificate.

Of rehabilitation?

Of rehabilitation. Thank you very much. [LAUGHS] But the fact of the matter was that on those identity cards that were filled out, very sort of bureaucratic printed cards, with handwritten data from my father, my mother, and my brother. With their nationality, so their nationality was Jewish. That's how they characterized nationality. It's not a--

A religion?

--a religious, but [NON-ENGLISH]. And where they were born, et cetera, et cetera. All accurately done. My mother's birthplace was Liverpool. And social status, et cetera, et cetera.

And then there were columns for why they had been deported. And then it said, socially [INAUDIBLE]. Socially dangerous elements. [SPEAKING RUSSIAN]. For my father, my mother, and my five-year-old brother. [LAUGHS]

And that was the first written--

That's the first and only thing that I had-- that anybody in the family had seen what their crime had been. So one of the purposes of my retracing that whole story and going back was to find the cause of the deportation, the character of the crime they were charged with. So that was the socially dangerous elements, for all three of them. And--

Was that the most significant new thing you learned by doing the documentary? About your own family. About your own.

Well, what occurred to me, how a bureaucratic system works, this was an empty bureaucratic characterisation. I could have said, you know, people who were rounded up and arrested in the Baltic countries in those years were very different groups. If you were-- people who were philatelists, collectors of stamps, were considered dangerous people, were rounded up and arrested. People who learned Esperanto were considered to be-- you know.

So this is how a totalitarian system works. And that-- I saw then sort of the material proof in front of my eyes in this-- the Germans had similar records. So there are many similarities between these two totalitarian systems, despite their very apparently different ideologies. But at a closer look, they were very similar.

Well, this-- you-- by-- on this last point, you bring me to a point where I've wanted to raise, and I have to find the right words to be able to do it. You described the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. You described how your family was just a few grains of sand within this pact.

You described how lucky you were that you actually were deported rather than left behind. And then you described what that luck consisted of.

My parents and my siblings.

That's right.

I was not there.

You were not there. But then you described what did this luck mean, and what did it result into in the 16 years that they were in the Soviet Union, in Siberia, and so on. And now I want to bring this up to how should we understand the destiny of these few grains of sand, and what are the things that you would want people to keep in mind when finding out about this part of the world.

And let me put it this way. If you were talking to different audiences, an audience that knows only of the Holocaust, what would you want them to understand about what your family went through? And I'll, you know, give a bit of context. When I was doing a story 20, 25 years ago, what we called competing martyrologies in Lithuania.

Competing--

Martyrology.

Yes.

There were people who said, but they said it from motivations that were a little different than yours, that ugh, if you were deported to Siberia, you survived, so it wasn't so bad. And what happened with us was worse. On the other side, I would talk to former deportees, and they would say, oh, those who weren't at the [NON-ENGLISH] who weren't at [NON-ENGLISH] and were deported after the war didn't have it so bad. We had it much worse.

And there was a kind of hierarchy, one could say, of suffering. So it's-- these sorts of experiences have sometimes become slogans for other agendas. And I would want-- there are very few people who have the authority, I would say the moral authority, to be able to address these.

And how would you go about trying to explain to different audiences that actually, there were some things that are maybe not so great with being deported. Or to those who say Stalin killed so many millions more that actually, genocide is something that's quite different than the kind of experience that comes with a Soviet deportation. These are big questions, but you were right in the nexus.

You know, that is a very tall order. But the way you phrase it is very accurate and very thought provoking. But have in mind, first of all, what many of the issues we talk about is not first-hand experiences.

I understand.

And something that I have experienced and worked through post-factum. And I'm no preacher. [LAUGHS] And I have no agenda, either moral or political agenda. Although I have very clear ideas about-- how should I phrase it?

I know. It's not easy.

The value system that we are living with or for and a product of one way or the other. What bothers me is that suffering and sacrifice are not issues-- or how should I say it? They are not entities that you can compare.

Or crimes against humanity. What is worse, the crimes Hitler committed, or the crimes Stalin committed? I mean, two of the worst criminals of the 20th century. I mean, I have no need of feeling a need for to make comparison. I think they should be judged and evaluated on their own premises.

And the suffering-- and it's not a question of volume, either. The suffering of one single person is one-- suffering one victim too many or too much, let alone when we start talking about millions.

In my family's case, what is interesting-- and I think that's important to point out-- and many readers of my parent's memoir have noticed. Almost all people I have spoken to say that they are amazed that there is no trace of bitterness or feeling of revenge or hatred. They have taken their fate in a very, I would say, if I can try to put myself outside, then I would say in a very stoic manner, without-- there is no martyr halo above their heads.

They never-- they recognized. They had a very sober understanding of what they went through. But they didn't exploit it to-- you know, I had to convince them how necessary it was to write their memoirs, not just for the cause-- for the family's cause, the children and grandchildren, their descendants would know part of the history, but how important and necessary it was as a piece of documentation of the human condition in the 20th century. Although it's just a family, one out of--

So you said--

--one out of millions of families. What I think is important is that each grain, as we call it, of sand reflects that reality of the 20th century. And one of the most murderous centuries in history. So the documentation of it is tremendously



important. And whether you do it as a memoir, as oral history testimony, as I think we're doing.

We're doing. Yes.

So I don't know how to get at it. I mean, it is-- to me, it's self-evident how important it is to share that kind of knowledge, experience, insights, to keep it for the coming generation. So this-- in our family's case, it's important on a very personal matter.

All the grandchildren of my parents have read, have familiarized. They know the story, appreciate it. And I know that there will be several other links, several other generations that probably will be enjoying to reading that story.

And for a wider audience, well, you know, there's-- I think that the book, my parents' book, *16 Years in Siberia*, came out in-- has been printed in 200,000 copies in Denmark, which is a tremendous, high number for a country of Denmark's size. So it was a bestseller for years. It was a publishing sensation, which testifies to the fact that it had a huge interest, that story.

Of course, it's the human interest that attracted. But through that they learned quite a bit of history of the mid-century European history and the reflection of some horrible political systems.

Did your parents-- were they surprised by the degree of interest in the book?

They certainly were. I had prepared them for it. I had told them, just wait. I mean, they received rave reviews from the very beginning. And I told them, just wait. This is just the beginning. And they spent-- they lived for 17 years after the book came out. And they stayed busy for-- they were--

They became stars?

They were stars. They were all over the media. There were interviews in the press, on the radio and television. And there were international editions in German and in English and some other ones after they passed away. And they became kind of celebrities.

And they kept lecturing. They toured the entire country. Even though Denmark is not the size of America, only 5 million people, but it's more than enough. We have a very, very developed lecturing culture. So they were invited.

They had more than 300 lectures in those years. And it made their day for 17 years, throughout their retirement years, which were active, fun, interesting. They were-- yeah, they became kind of stars.

And I-- and that was part of my purpose, honestly. [LAUGHS] I wanted them to have a good time. And I actually-- I never claimed any credit for my participation. I never appeared on-- that remained between me and them and the publisher.

I see. So it--

So now I really leaked the secret.

You are. I see. [LAUGHS] Yes. Well, you mentioned it throughout. And it was that you helped with the manuscript and so on.

Yes.

But why were they resistant? Did they not see their story as special?

Well, I had to convince them. They didn't think much of it. They didn't-- so would that be interesting, they asked me. Would other people be interested? And not that-- many Holocaust survivors--

They have the same point of view?

Well, but they didn't want to talk about it. I mean, the Holocaust survivors. Many Holocaust survivors didn't want even to tell their families. Because their experiences really had been so terrifying, so traumatic.

My parents, on the other hand, not that this was [SIGHS] a picnic, but it was an ordeal. But in all senses, a very demanding experience, an ordeal. But they didn't mind talking about their years.

They-- my father was great in telling the-- sort of in anecdotal form, in a dramatic form. And he-- this was part of his life, to talk and tell about-- both about the younger years of his earlier life, in Germany, in Lithuania, whatever, but also about the deportation.

But this was still a jump for them to believe that they could turn it into a book, and this would be interesting. So they didn't feel much about it. They saw it -- And then they wrote-- we wrote together three other volumes.

Which have not been translated into other languages.

No, they are in Danish only.

Yes. Yes. The-- well, the reasons you--

I wonder, did I respond to what you asked me about?

Partially. It's a big question.

It is--

It's a big question.

You know, the thing is that the evil or totalitarian systems and the lack of freedom and basic democratic and human rights is the curse of mankind, especially now, in this enlightened century that we live in, and the past century for that matter, too. This is what we are up against.

And I don't mind, I don't care, rather, whether-- what color it is. But a totalitarian system, they are all the same at the core. They-- this is the-- what do you call it, a scourge?

A scourge.

Scourge of mankind. This is the evil, the vicious conditions that you-- I mean, just think of-- I mean, it's mind boggling to think about the mass of lives that were wasted in the 20th century in the name of totalitarian ideologies. And for that matter, I think-- we keep coming back to the Molotov-Ribbentrop.

It was more than just symbolic that the two greatest criminals found each other, although for that short period. But they embraced each other. They danced with each other. They killed together. And they learned from each other. And they supported each other.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was much more than just a nonaggression pact, as I think I said at the beginning of our talk. They collaborated. They supported each other. They understood each other.

And it's paradoxical that Nazism and communism, they could walk step in step for a period of two years, and probably would have done it longer. That was their intention, I think. Stalin's dream was that they could get along much longer.

That is a horrible part of the reality of the 20th century, how ruthless rulers, there are no borders. There are no limits to

what they can do in the name of-- [SIGHS] of good, in their minds. But in reality, in the name of evil.

Thank you. Thank you very much. Are there things that I have not asked you about that you think are important to include here in our discussion?

Probably, yes, of course.

Yes. How can four hours--

More than four hours. We cannot have exhausted everything. But I don't know. I don't think I can contribute much more than what I have said.

Well, I think--

I think I have shared what I could share with you on-- actually, more.

Thank you. It's much appreciated. Thank you very much. And so this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr Samuel Rachlin on Tuesday, May 12, 2015, here in Washington DC. Thank you very much.

And thank you. It was a pleasure.

Same here.