

This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Joseph Feingold on April 21-- 25th, excuse me-- 2017 in Manhattan, New York. Thank you very much, Mr. Feingold, for agreeing to speak with us today and to share your story with us.

It is a long story. It is a very important and complex story. And I'm going to start at the very beginning. So my first question is, can you tell me what was the date of your birth?

March 23, 1923.

And where were you born?

In Warsaw.

In Poland.

In Poland, yeah.

And what was your name at birth?

Today you're Joseph--

Spelling-- it came down to the same thing. But my child's name was Jozio.

Jozio.

Yeah. Which is spelled, in Polish, J-O-- dot on top of it-- Z-I-O.

Jozio.

Jozio.

And that's a diminutive?

Diminutive. It was Yossel.

Yossel. And Jozio is a diminutive in Yiddish or in Polish?

In Polish.

And Yossel?

Yossel is Yiddish.

Is Yiddish. So you had two diminutive names, one where you were Yossel and one where you were Jozio.

When I was a child in Warsaw. My name was also spelt-- last name-- in a Polish way. Feingold spelled F-A-J-N-G-O-D

That's different than in the English way.

Correct. What about your parents? What were their names, your father and your mother?

My father's name was Aaron Schlomer. My mother used to call him Aaron Schlomer. So I always thought his name is Schlomer primarily. But it is Aaron.

Aaron. And your mother?

And my mother was Ruchel Leah. Ruchel.

Ruchel.

Leah. And again, the same thing-- as a child the stress is always on the last half of her name, Ruchel Leah. So she was essentially Ruchel Leah. In the film Joe's Violin they use the name Leah.

I see.

But it's not the way she was known.

I see. What was her maiden name?

Jakubowski.

Jakubowski?

Yeah. And she lived on Gesia 29. My father used to live on Gesia-- that's the name of a street-- 31. So they was neighbors.

Did they know each other?

Not directly. How they got to know is that my father used to go to a club when there was a lot of entertainment singing. My mother's brothers, the oldest son, was-- and in particular Herzel, the oldest one, was a famous-- in that time, in that place-- as soloist, basso profundo. They got together. They was very close. So eventually Herzel said to my father, why don't you meet my sister? That's how they got. And they got married.

Did you have brothers and sisters?

I had two brothers.

What were their names?

A second after me is Alexander. Alex is known now. And as a child he was known as Oles.

Oles.

Yeah. He survived. And the third one, who was born four years later-- his name is Henry. Known as Henius.

Henius.

Henius. He did not survive.

Who is the oldest?

I was.

You were the oldest.

Yeah.

And did your parents have brothers and sisters?

My mother had seven brothers.

Oh, wow. They were all very much interested in music, singing. But by profession they were-- one was a barber. One was a children's clothing manufacturer. In that area was other ones-- odds and ends.

Tell me--

Low class working people.

So you'd say your family was working class?

Yeah.

In Warsaw?

Yeah.

Had the families been there for generations, or had they come from someplace else to Warsaw?

Well, my father came from a small town called Zawichost.

Zawichost?

Yeah. Nobody knows it because it's too darn small. And so when he was born in 1893, the certificate which I found just recently, sent by Tokarska, was written by Russian authorities in Sandomir.

In Sandomir?

Sandomir is a pretty large community, also on the Vistula River.

So not far from Zawichost?

Not far.

Explain to people who may not know, how is it that your father's certificate would be written in Russian?

Because Russia was at that time under the Russian administration.

So was all of Poland under Russian administration, or--

Most of it.

Most of it.

Yeah.

Most of it.

Western part was part under the-- under German. And the southern part, Krakow among them, and Lemberg, was under the Austrian.

Lemberg?

Lemberg.

I thought Lemberg is Lvov.

Is Lvov. It's the same town.

And that would be under the Russians, I believe.

No, no, no. Very complicated thing. It was for hundreds of years under the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Even Lemberg? Even Lemberg. I was surprised. I thought--

Until 1920, when there was a war in Poland, newly resurrected country. And the Bolsheviks, the new revolutionary government in Russia, and Trotsky organized the Red Army. And they're marching to liberate the rest of Europe. They liberated Lvov, or L'viv, as it's called today. Lwow, as it's called in Poland.

Went on to Poland, to Warsaw. They were stopped. The Poles called it the miracle on the Vistula River. The Red Army was stopped and the Germans-- no, [INAUDIBLE] Germans. Anyway, they set up [INAUDIBLE] treatment-- agreement in Brest-Litovsk.

So this is the First World War, at the end of the First World War.

Correct. And soon after, yeah.

Soon after. And so your family-- your father's side of the family comes from the eastern part of Poland. Is that correct?

Well, central.

Central. And that was occupied by the Russian forces in the 19th century. Is that right?

Correct. It's a whole story about how it came about, until Napoleon, because it independent country. And it lost its independence little by little.

Now, on your mother's side of the family, were they from Warsaw from generations, or had they come--

Yes. I don't know, really, how far back, but as far as I know. Yes, my grandfather was there.

And what kind of profession, or what-- well, maybe the best word to use is, how did they make a living? How did your grandparents support each side? What was the tradition that your father came from and your mother came from as far as making a living?

I'll start with the simple way. That is my mother's side. I told you about the brothers. They were into the-- well, today called needle trades. Two of them became a barber. But the rest were all in the needle trades. And another one was on the up and down, importing. That's my mother's side.

By needle trades do you mean something like being a tailor?

Tailor, yes. Well, they specialized. One of them, Herzel, for instance, specialized in children's clothing. And he has a great voice. And he was given constant invitations to come to the United States.

Oh, really?

But he's about to go, in the meantime, the season for children's clothing started, and he couldn't just leave it. And that's

how--

He never came.

--eventually lost his life. He also played a great part in my life besides the fact that he introduced his sister to become my mother to my father.

And so it was not just the needle trades and not just tailoring. It was specialization within that branch.

Yeah.

And on your father's side of the family?

My father comes from a long line-- woodworkers, in wood in different forms. His profession in Polish was called [POLISH].

[POLISH]?

Yeah, [POLISH].

What does that mean? Woodturner. I did a lot of that. The funny coincidence is, the professor in Poland-- her name is Tokarska. But that's just one of--

What is a woodturner? What does that mean, to be a woodturner? Oh, let's cut.

So off camera you were telling me that a piece of furniture, like a leg of a chair or leg of a table, needs to be shaped in some way.

Correct.

And so that's what a woodturner would do?

Yes.

Did you see him at work?

Oh, yeah. Sure. Remember, we are talking about the beginning of the 20th century. Things are pretty primitive. But what he did is a machine which has, at that time, connected electricity to a motor.

Oh, it was a machine connected to a motor.

Yeah. And the piece of wood-- say it were this size. He puts the piece of wood between two clamps. And the things start turning.

And there is-- in front of it there's another plate where you rest a chisel, a very sharp chisel of [INAUDIBLE] shape, and then move that chisel as the thing turns. You give it a shape to the leg. This is bigger. And then give a neck, and then a couple of smaller--

That takes great--

--indentations.

It takes great skill--

Oh, yeah.

--to do something--

So that's what he did. That was his profession. So he was-- he started as a [POLISH].

As a [POLISH]. Did he make furniture?

No. No. What was it that he usually would make?

This was in the beginning, really. Obviously, lots of competition. His father was called the [POLISH].

[POLISH].

[POLISH] is a carpenter. I think his father may have made some furniture, and he did the decorative part. So together-- they worked together. But that was in the small town. Eventually, for one reason or another, he found out there's a great need of women's shoes-- heels.

Heels?

Heels attached to women's shoes. And they had to be a certain shape.

Oh my goodness.

So he starts doing that by hand. For that he has to-- it's another machine. That machine, at that time, was not electrical. And I--

You saw him do that?

Pardon me?

You saw him do these shoes?

Oh, sure.

These heels.

Oh, yeah. Yeah. And also, the way you put a piece of wood-- it's shaped in a certain way. Also, [INAUDIBLE] clamps. And you sit in front of it and you have what's called an [POLISH]

[POLISH].

--which is an instrument. Two handles, and extremely sharp blade. And with that blade and your elbow you move it, turn it this way, that way. You take the middle out. You take it this way. You give it a shape. And he-- it becomes a heel.

Who knew that heels took such complications? Who would think?

Well, it was very simple at that time. Later on, of course, they invented machines.

But it still takes skill. It's not like you press it and out it goes.

Yeah. That [POLISH], by the way-- that's another story. But when I had a country place upstate--

In New York.

In New York. And I loved old instruments. And I went to the-- all these weekend exhibits of old tools, particular tools. And they had these [POLISH].

Oh, they had them?

Yeah. Yeah. I said, oh, here's my father's instrument.

Did he work for himself or did he work for someone else?

He started at his own. Then he brought in his brother. Warsaw-- it was in the midst of the depression. And he was told-- he found out that Kielce, a town south of Warsaw, had a big industry of women's heels-- women's shoes. There would be a need for the shoes-- heels. So he went there. And they start preparing it.

Can we cut for a sec?

Hold on. Yeah.

Yeah? By then?

The manufacturing all of the heels was done by machines.

I see.

So he had to load a machine, the two sides. Each had six such pieces of wood. And it was moving to the set of sharp instruments, out, back, forth, back, forth. That machine and two or three others were attended by one woman. So it was, naturally--

Simpler.

Economically, yeah.

How did it happen that you know such details about your father's work? Because I talk to many people who-- and I ask them, what did your father do? What did your mother do? And they say, I don't know, they went to work. And I didn't know what they did while they were there. How is it that you know that?

My father was also a very fascinating guy, in retrospect. He was very knowledgeable about other things-- a lot. One of the things that he conveyed to me is inventiveness with wood. When my father was looking at a machine and he sees some machine goes back and forth automatically he was thinking, maybe there's a way of doing one person, in one hand can do it in a fraction of the time. So there was a mechanic. And he engaged the guy to design that machine.

So he wasn't just turning wood. He was thinking of how to make it.

How to make it, how to improve it. In retrospect, when I think about it I think, my god, it was a dangerous thing, what he was doing, because later on-- some years later, he lost his eye [INAUDIBLE] of wood.

Now, this is just one part of it. It just so happens in the midst of reading-- of writing some parts of the memoir in greater detail. An adult-- how come that I developed a great interest in construction and architecture?

Well, yes, that's a good question.

So in fact, I'm now telling this to Sheila.

And Sheila is here to update your memoir. To help you update it.

I wrote it. She has to put it together, put it in the proper way, and see how it fits in the whole thing.

And you wrote your memoir originally-- in what year was that?

'85.

1985. So that would now be 32 years ago, if we're in 2017. Yeah.

Yeah. And it's the-- to go back, the construction-- what I describe is I was always interested in construction. When someone asked me, as kids did here from the Jewish center on 75th Street, what toys did I get? I don't remember any toys. But I do remember that I made them.

So you were creative.

Well, now it's called creative, yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Then it was, what do I play with?

Yeah. So I made airplanes and boats and everything else, and houses. Then what happened, which is a very important part of the story, is my father played the state lottery and he lost-- he won some money. Not much.

So there are actual lottery winners in this world.

Yeah. So he decided-- we lived in a rental house in a suburb of Kielce at that time. And he said, [INAUDIBLE], maybe, we should build our own house. He sent my mother to exhibit in Western Poland, Poznan. There was an exhibit of modern architecture. Came back with a plan of American plan, American houses. And that, of course, we fell in love with that. That was very nice. It was so different from the conventional houses built of logs in the suburbs of Kielce.

So in the suburbs of Kielce houses were built from logs, from planks?

Yeah.

So were they like these old houses that you sometimes see in Russia, in villages, where you'll have a steeped roof--

Yeah.

--but you'll have the-- I see.

But the houses that she came back with was an American house. In fact, I'm just in the midst of writing it. Yesterday, last night, I wrote some more details.

Can you tell us what kind of a house would it be similar to here? Would it be a ranch house? Would it be an adobe? Would it be--

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, that's exactly what I was writing. The house now-- at that time, of course, I didn't realize-- it was an American ranch house. How it was different-- the method of building walls were different. First of all, it was a double wall of [INAUDIBLE] in between. So we got to know that that's good for insulation. Then the roof had to be more or less flat.

Oh.



Which is quite different.

Yes, it is.

The windows were large picture windows. In Poland we didn't have that. That was one wing. The other wing was the living one like the kitchen, with an indoor bathroom.

That's quite innovative.

So when we built it people passed by and couldn't believe it. They called it the miracle on [NON-ENGLISH]-- I forgot the name of the street. That was the house that my father--

So he comes from a working class background and he ends up--

But he was a builder. And we had to have an architect who designed it. I was too damn young. So I was very impressed with his drawings, his blueprints and that the blueprints had to be hung to dry. The method of doing them was quite different. His name was Koch. And he was also the first tenant of the house, because we had to divide it into two. We took part of it, and he lived with his family there.

Was it on one level or two-- were there two--

Two levels.

Two stories.

Well, there was a living room and a separate wing with the siding. I think it was vertical siding.

Vertical? Not horizontal? Hm.

No, I think it was vertical. But also, each sheet, board had to be shaped tongue and groove so that they fit, they fit, and so on. And the foundation was made of stone. And it was off the ground. And a big space we called the terrace.

And I used to play what I called ping pong, without the net. Whoever wanted to play, and we were friends. I played with Alex, my brother. Primarily girlfriends. I remember the girlfriend.

Oh, you had a girlfriend?

Oh, yeah.

How old were you?

I had girlfriends since I was-- oh, I don't know-- eight.

Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness.

[LAUGHTER]

I remember their names very well.

What was the name of your first girlfriend?

Mira Potocka.

Mira Potocka?

Yeah.

Mira Poto--

How old was Mira?

Well, she was my age. Seven or eight. And I was in love with her.

Was she in love with you?

I don't think so. I know, it was a--

Women can be blind.

She came from a good-to-do family. And once she invited me to her house. When I got there, after some greeting, whatever it was taking place, she got on the phone and called a neighbor to come down. Now, telephone--

That's one of my questions.

--at that time was-- no, I never heard-- I never saw it. I mean, I knew of it. And I was obviously-- obvious that I was jealous how come she invited a neighbor's boy.

Competition.

I don't remember the details. But anyway, there's no point going into it. But that's my affair.

So it was two things that sound interesting-- many things, actually. But for me trying to get a picture of what was life like-- A, she had a telephone, which was unusual.

She was.

And B, she invited some competition down, in other words.

That's right. I didn't realize that. And we were sitting there and looking at some pictures. And she was in the middle. And the boy was to the left. I was to the right. I put my arm around her. And I see the boy's boy-- arm go on that side.

[LAUGHTER]

Something is wrong with that picture. Something is very wrong, yes.

Well, then came other girls.

But let's go back to-- I ask this question a lot. In the new house that your parent-- that your father designed and with your mother and the new designs and the architect, did you have modern conveniences? Was there electricity? Was there some kind of heating system that was updated from what you would have had before? Was there indoor plumbing?

The indoor plumbing was that toilet was outside.

So that's outdoor plumbing. But it's not plumbing.

Outdoor. Yeah. There was no water in the kitchen-- or at least a good part of it, because I remember that my brother and I went to the corner pump. And my father had made out a stick that-- it was on his shoulder and my shoulder. In

between we hung up a pail and filled it up with water. So that was--

So even in this house you had to bring water into the house.

Yeah. Later on we built a pump. We dug a pump in the house-- not in the house, just outside. It was a shallow pump. And the other thing is, the water pump was good enough for dishes. So the water that we're bringing was really for cooking--

I see.

--or drinking.

I see. And did you have electricity?

Yeah. We did have electricity.

No phone.

No phone.

Did you have a radio?

A great invention came to us at that time, where we had a crystal radio. And the crystal-- I don't know what it was made of. And you had to have another part over a needle. And you're jabbing that crystal. Oh, yes, ear bones. And you found a station. And that's why I heard a lot of music that I got to know, through that--

Through that crystal radio.

--that crystal radio. Later on-- I don't know. Obviously we were too poor to explore any other way, because eventually my father became very friendly with another guy who-- well to do. And he had a radio-- a machine, a piece of furniture. So I used to go to him.

To listen to the radio.

To listen to the music, yeah.

And what-- was mostly music on the radio, or was there also news and proclamations and speeches and things like that?

I myself was interested in music. But I also remember, very vivid-- also, obviously, by accident, they had a drama on the radio. Conversation. [INAUDIBLE] between a man and a woman. I listened to it. And to me it's another discovery, really. That was to me.

But to you it was.

Modern technique, yes.

Let's turn now to your mother's side. You mentioned a lot about music being an important part of your mother's life, of her siblings having musical talents, of an uncle almost going to the United States. Is that something that appeared in their generation, or did it come from their own parents?

How did this musical affinity-- where did it come from? Was it within the family for a long time? Was there a cantor? Tell me about that.

Not that I know of. My uncles-- they were not religious, just like we were not.

That was also one of my questions, whether you were religious or not.

No. But they-- as poor as they were, they went to the Warsaw Opera. But if they couldn't hear some good singing they would talk to each other that this Saturday a famous cantor will be performing. So the cantor very often used arias from operas as part of a service. So to them, to know good music or listen to good music was done many ways.

I see. I see.

And I have so many memories of that. If I may.

Sure.

Just a small-- when I was a little kid, probably more than three or so, I used to cry. So they say, let's wait until Herzl, the oldest brother, comes. Herzl comes. He says, Jozio is singing? I mean, crying? Come on, Jozio. Puts him in his-- on his lap, on his knees. He says, Jozio, [VOCALIZING] and I have to say, [VOCALIZING]. And I say, [VOCALIZING].

[LAUGHTER]

So he took your mind off the crying.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. He was such a big guy with a big voice, and full of life. That family-- I don't know. To me it is natural for them to sing, to be involved in producing sound. My mother knew all the Yiddish songs, arias.

The way they went to opera-- they went there and got the standing room only at opera. So it cost 25 kopeks or [NON-ENGLISH]. But they couldn't stand for two or three hours. So they had to bribe the attendant to find a seat for them.

I got sick one day. But that was some years later. I was-- at that time lived in Kielce. No, I'm jumping. It was vacation time. And my parents felt confident enough for me to go to Warsaw by myself to visit my friends and relatives.

From Kielce.

From Kielce to Warsaw.

To Warsaw.

I was the guest of my mother's youngest brother, who survived the war.

What was his name?

Jacob. Within a day I got sick. I stayed in bed. I got the flu. When I recovered enough he gave me a special treat. We went to the opera. And my very first opera I ever saw was Faust, by Gounod. And I remember very vividly that performance.

Mephistopheles, in the beginning, doesn't make an appearance on the page. On stage his voice comes from some kind of red light in the ceiling. I mean, all these things impress me now. These are things to remember. And before the end of my vacation I went with the help of another friend to Warsaw for [INAUDIBLE], a concert devoted to Edvard Grieg.

Devoted to what?

Edvard Grieg.

Oh, Edvard Grieg.

Yeah. So there was a piano concerto and then-- and the songs. I remember very well. And that song, later on, became a theme in the film Joe's Violin.

Oh, really? In the film Joe's Violin?

Yeah. In your film, then.

Yeah. Yeah, they have the song [INAUDIBLE]. So that's how film starts.

It sounds like you got a legacy from each parent-- probably many legacies, but ones that sound-- that you've articulated are, from your mother's side, music. From your father's side, this fascination with wood and construction and how things work and how to improve. And for anybody, whether they're from-- whatever socioeconomic strata they're in, that's quite a legacy. And particularly from working class people who-- one of my questions is, did they have any kind of higher education, either side of your parents?

My father finished the cheder. And I don't think that my mother's brothers went beyond that.

Did they go to any public schools, any Polish public schools?

No. Not them.

Not them.

But not so my mother. She had brothers and sisters.

Your mother had sisters?

Yeah.

I thought she was the only one.

No, no, no. She had sisters. But none of them survived. And each one-- except for Jakob. No, no, Jakob and another one. Each one of them had a very important role in my life. It's not of great interest to you.

Yes, it is.

But to me--

Yeah, but it is. It is the people who shaped you. That is what I'm interested in. Why I spend so much time about finding out what was your life before the war is these are the people who shaped you. And so I'm interested to know about them.

Let me start with the youngest one, Jakob. He was a barber. His brother, older brother, was also a barber. But he had greater ambitions, which means he went to Paris--

Oh my goodness.

--to study women's style. He came back. He had a mandolin, played the mandolin. Spoke French. He was a man, to us, of the outside culture. He took his younger brother, Jakob, under his care. Jakob didn't go to Paris. He met a girl, became politically active. He belonged to the Hashomer Hatzair.

Tell us what that is.

Hashomer Hatzair was a Zionist outfit, but socialist. And also Yiddish speaking, and Hebrew, too.

When the war started he managed to leave the rest of his family and took his wife, his new wife, to Ukraine. The war broke out from where you went to Kharkov, another town. The Germans were getting closer and closer. Eventually he went to Sverdlovsk. Now it's called Yekaterinburg. And he had two children. My mother was very fond of him.

This was Jakob, yes?

Jakob. And that was 1940, when the war-- Poland stopped to exist. But there was peace between Germany and Russia.

You know something? Let's hold on about this. We'll come to this point. At this point you were telling me about how each of your uncles and each of your mother's-- your aunts had a role in your life, a really important role. If Jakob was one and his brother who went to Paris-- what was his name?

Henrik.

Henrik was another. What about some of the others?

Well, there was, of course, Hertzke.

Hertzke, who you've told us about.

Mendel.

Mendel.

He was second in command and in business and in everything. So they were always together. There was Yossel.

Yossel.

Who was a businessman. He had constant fights with his wife. Every time he had a fight in Warsaw he came to Kielce.

To cool off?

[LAUGHTER]

To cool off, to get my wife's-- no, my mother's advice what to do. And then there was Sigmund.

Tell us about Sigmund.

Sigmund was a special character. He was tall, good looking, believing that he belongs to higher society. Stories were told how he went outside of his house, stands there on a stoop or whatever it was and says, [POLISH] is a--

Taxi?

Taxi. Of course, on a horse. He wouldn't deign to go down. [NON-ENGLISH]. He, being so tall and good looking-- he was enrolled in the Polish army cavalry. Now, Jews don't go there. But he became a member of the cavalry.

He must have cut a very dashing figure.

He did. He was a great dancer. He was known as a big, big dancer and became friends with colonels and lieutenants in the army. One day he came to visit us in Kielce in full uniform. He sat down and his saber-- at that time you had to have a saber. It was probably dangling there. And I came over on the sly, and I managed to pull out his saber. My mother became hysterical. Sigmund.

What happened to Sigmund?

He became a part of the Polish underground during the war. He was caught by the Germans, sent to Auschwitz, and exterminated.

I see.

Alex, my brother, somehow got to know a bit more about his fate.

I see. And the others?

Sigmund.

You say only Jakob survived.

No, and also another one, another son-- brother. He survived. He [INAUDIBLE] the Soviet Union, just like I did. We didn't know about each other. In 1946 the Jews were allowed to leave the Soviet Union.

I'm sorry, I'm going to interrupt right there. Let's save that part for later on, like the part about the German and Soviet friendship in the beginning. We'll come to these things. At this point I want to ask a few more questions about pre-war life. You mentioned earlier that your family was not religious.

Right.

Was your family interested in-- any one of your family interested in outside life beyond work, beyond interests, beyond home? For example, were they political at all? Were they engaged? Did they follow the news?

Did they follow-- when I asked about the radio, one of the reasons I ask about that is, how did you find out about what was going on in the wider world? Was that one of the ways? Or if that wasn't, what was a way? So I'm asking many questions in one, but it's all in this general direction.

I'll fill in chapters about that. We was very much involved in the outside world. When we went to eat, when my father came from work for lunch the first thing he did-- he took out his newspaper, Volkszeitung.

Volks--

Volkszeitung.

Volkszeitung.

And he read it. And of course, I couldn't leave him behind. And I read a book. So he was reading, I was reading. My mother was dishing out our dish-- our food and engaging. We were interested, he and I, as young as I was-- what's happening at that time? Starting with the uprising of the socialist city government in Vienna.

Really? The socialist city government in Vienna was of interest to you?

Yeah, because that was-- eventually was suppressed by Dreyfus-- not Dreyfus.

Schuschnigg?

No.

Not Schuschnigg.

Some other. Anyway, [INAUDIBLE]. But in the meantime, the war in Spain, the civil war of Spain--

1936.

'36. I followed every move of republicans. To me it meant so much. My father's cousin volunteered, came to see us on the way to Spain. He enlisted in the army. And the very first day he was killed in action.

Oh, dear.

So I followed constantly. That's politics. My father--

So I just want to ask one quick question. Volkszeitung-- was that a Yiddish paper?

Yiddish socialist paper.

OK. That's what I wanted to find out. So your father, you're saying-- you were about to start saying about him, about your father.

Yeah. There's a lot to say about him.

About his politics.

I was so involved. He was not a Zionist. And of course, I inherited, to a great extent, not all, his political outlook. And that led to a lot of discussions and fights-- not physical, but very vociferous discussions.

Is Zionism the future for the Jews in Poland? He didn't believe so. We believed that socialism would solve all the problems. But in the meantime, of course, was the growth of Hitler.

Did you talk about that? Before the war, did you--

Before the war, yeah.

Before the war, did you talk much about what was going on in Germany?

All the time, of course. We were so involved, much more so than anybody would expect the young people in United States to be involved. Perhaps they will be because of the theatrics of Trump. But not in a deep way.

It sounds like you were very engaged. Very engaged.

I was very engaged. I mean, what happened-- I read so many books about Spain, about socialism, the origin, Marx, Engels. No, forget Engels-- Hegel. These things interested me, as young as I was. I probably didn't understand a good part of it.

But at the same time, I just-- I loved Beethoven. And then a book came out.

You loved Beethoven?

Yeah.

Is that what you're saying? Yeah. OK.

And a book came out by Romain Rolland, French writer.

Romain Laurent-- Rolland.



Named Jean-Christophe.

Jean-Christophe?

Yeah. The book is based on the life of Beethoven, but he transports him not to Vienna, but to Paris-- gives him an excuse to do that. So I was so fascinated by that. Then I started reading other books about that. And I was interested in Paris and Balzac. And I knew history. I know the location of every piece of Paris long before I ever went to Paris.

Wow.

So when I look back now, I was very engaged-- [FRENCH], as the French say. It was [INAUDIBLE].

Tell me about your father. What made him have his political views? I mean, many Jews were traditional orthodox. There were many orthodox Jews in Poland, very religious. What happened that he had the views that he did? Was there something that influenced his life?

I don't know particular influenced him. But he was still a young man in Zawichost. He lost his faith.

He lost his faith in Zawichost.

Yeah. And he was very much taken by the Bundists, socialist Jewish movement. He became very active in it until he died. And, of course, he involved me with him.

In some ways, it's natural. You're the oldest son. You're the oldest child. And a parent will share a lot that way. What did you think of Pilsudski?

Well, I recognized at that time that he was a benevolent dictator. What I do remember is 1926. Pilsudski decided to suppress the workers' movement. And there was some rioting going on on the street. Some were [INAUDIBLE]. At that time we lived in Warsaw at [POLISH] Street.

We closed the door. But I-- there was a crack I could outside. And I saw policemen-- I think policemen. Maybe soldiers-- with sabers, drawn sabers, chasing people. And of course, I was--

You were a little boy.

I was a little boy. But I was very-- that impressed me very much. I mean, frightened.

Yeah, of course. It was a negative impression.

Seeing the people with sabers-- my god. They could kill anybody. So that's Pilsudski. When he died--

1935.

1935?

Mm-hmm.

Most of Jews consider that he was a good friend of the Jews.

What do you think? Or what was it in your family? What was--

He started as a socialist. And of course, the tendency of people with power to get it more and more without limitation-- and that's what happened to him. Very easy. Poland didn't have much of a tradition of democracy.

But nevertheless, the Jews felt quite safe. Whenever anything happened there was another government proclamation. So the usual expression among Jews was, [YIDDISH]? Is it good for Jews? That is always-- yeah, how is it good for Jews? Until Hitler. Well, as you said, he died in '35. Hitler came in '33.

In Germany, yes.

Yeah. And his influence spread. And the Germans, the Poles took it and thought it would serve their own nationalistic ambitions.

Are you saying that in a societal way or in a political way? That is, were there political policies or parties, or was this something that you felt in Polish society?

Going through Trump, going through Spain-- not Spain, France, and other places, you start wondering, really. Of course, I have to read. What makes people accept people like that, who have already a slogan, already solutions? And how come people believe it? They think [? along with-- ?]

Well, you know--

I have no answer for that, really.

I understand. I have a provocative question. People say the same thing about communism and about socialism, is what makes them believe that when reality can be so different?

I went through both of these regimes. So I don't particularly cherish to think that socialism and communism are related. Yes, they were both very much influenced by Marx. And after Marx there was Kautsky.

And there were many others who developed the idea of Democratic socialism, where the will of the people has to be considered. You can't consider-- suppress minorities. You can't suppress opposition-- until Lenin-- Stalin, after him.

As I believe that proletariat, as they call it-- working class-- that's where the future is. They are the ones who built a new society. And whenever you build a new society there always will be, naturally, victims. And what do you do with them who don't like it? Well, take Stalin, who sent them to a labor camp.

Well, there is that-- I'm going off theme for a little bit, but I'll get back to it. There is that saying, in order to make an omelet you have to break a few eggs. And then some people would then say, well, but where's the omelet?

Yeah. How come it tastes so bad?

Yeah. How come it tastes so bad. But let's go back. One of the reasons I was asking about Pilsudski and about this is that I wanted to find out the sense of, what were Polish-Jewish relations like? What was it like growing up as a Jew in Poland? And how much did that form you and shape you and inform how you looked at the world?

Although I was not religious, as were my parents-- as they were not religious-- we were a great believer what's called in Yiddish [YIDDISH].

[YIDDISH].

Worldwide.

Worldliness.

Yeah.

Is that the correct translation?

Yeah. They sent me to a school. The kindergarten was [POLISH]. It was named by a Swiss educator named Froehlich. That school followed the methods developed by Froehlich. From that school-- I finished it-- they sent me to a school-- there were six such schools in Warsaw which were run by the socialists-- socialist Zionists and socialist non-Zionists.

But Jewish.

Yeah, but they were Jewish.

Jewish. Not Polish socialists. Not Polish-- not Gentile socialists.

No. And that's probably one of the most beautiful parts of my life, in that school. That's where I got to know and love Mira Pidlacka.

Pidlacka was her name?

Yeah.

I thought it was Potocka.

Potocka.

Potocka. Potocka.

Yeah. Their teaching language was Yiddish. But Polish was given just as much attention. And of course, there was math, translations, and this and that. And what you-- I don't know, whatever you do with kids that age. Obviously I did very well, because I just loved it-- until the age of nine. In 1932--

You were born in '24?

'23.

'23. So 1932, yeah.

My father, by then, was in Kielce. And so after I finished that school year [INAUDIBLE] I-- the whole family goes to Kielce to join my father. And that's where we built that-- we rented that house in the suburb. And the school I went to was a public school.

I was pretty good student in the school. Obviously, my abilities stood out. So I became a favorite of some of the teachers. They always called me to play an important role. So I had no problem being Jewish.

However, the other boys-- that class was huge, 30-something, or maybe 40 kids. If you didn't do the right homework or didn't answer the right thing, stretch out your hand, and the teacher would hit it with a piece of wood.

Yeah.

That does-- but never to me. A boy was named [? Lebush. ?]

Leibus.

And that teacher constantly was teaching him-- teasing him.

Teasing him.

Leibus put Trotsky. Leibus is Trotsky's name. So to the teacher, he was a Jew, another Trotsky. Trotsky was the persona non grata in Poland. Couldn't think of anything lower than Trotsky. So the kid became a Trotsky.

So all the stereotypes that the teacher had, he or she-- was it a he or a she, the teacher?

That teacher was Jewish-- I mean, a woman. But--

He focused--

But my brother, youngest brother--

Henry.

Henry. When I think of him-- he was very proud of himself. I believe he was very smart. And he once-- he was called by the names. Henry, you are a Jew. So he said, what did you call me? He started trying to pick a fight. He wouldn't take it-- I mean, the way it was meant.

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. No, no, no. So it sounds like it came from both teachers, like in this instance not to you personally, but to Leibus.

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

And also from kids.

Oh, yeah. It was widespread. But you see, it was such a mixed situation at that time. My mother was very proud of me. And she said, we have to do more than just you going to the public school. You have to go to the middle school and so on. And I'll do everything that I can do.

My mother became a very good friend of a [POLISH], of the principal of a school. And they decided that Jozio, me, is good material to go on. And they managed to have me admitted-- not graduate, because I had a special test to admit to the high school in Poland, in Kielce, which was at that time only non-Jews.

I see. Only Gentiles.

Only Gentiles. And I was admitted. It was, in fact, very sensation-- from what I remember as a kid. In town I was the first Jew to admitted in that school. So I did very well. In fact--

Did you like it there, in that school?

For me, it's studying. Remember, things of this I studied, the chemistry, I remember even now. Physics, mathematics, equations. I could still do the equations that I learned there. All these things were so important to me. [INAUDIBLE], my mother gave me to do the homework-- I said, here, here's the homework. I sat down, look at it, and I filled it right out. I didn't wait till next day, because I need some time to play or read and so on.

So I was recognized. I got the summa cum laude in the first year.

That's pretty good. That's very good.

And not only that, but the bishop of Kielce was the special guest at graduation of that year.

Yeah, of that class year.

Yeah. And I was invited to take his hand and, god forbid, kiss his ring--

Oh my god.

--which I didn't do. That was the first year. Second year, didn't do so well. I didn't get the high mark, and so on. But I do come across. That school-- I mean, that's one particular instrument reminds me. Not much of an instrument, but a fragment.

In that class that I was in the top was me and the son of the director of the school. We were very friendly. And among the students was a son--

[PHONE RINGING]

Let's cut.

So before the break we were talking about your experience in the public--

High school.

--in high school, and that you and the director's son were at the top of the class-- that you were at the top, and then the next person was the director's son himself.

Or maybe both.

Or both.

Janiciek.

Janiciek.

His name was Janiciek. Very fine young man. And he was given the task of taking care of the son of a local-- what was called in Polish [POLISH].

[POLISH]?

Aristocracy. They had, probably, some estates. And that fellow wouldn't dare to talk to me.

Oh, really?

No.

I see.

And but I was very friend with his sponsor friend. One day, very much in my mind, I thought, I'll say something very innocent to him. I thought that will engage him in some conversation. He looks at me down. Hey. What's last time you were tending to the pigs in my farm?

When was the last time you're tending to the pigs in my farm?

Yeah.

That was his response?

That was a response.

It was meant to put you in your place.

Absolutely. Well, of course that was the end of it.

Did you experience that a lot?

Not really. No. No, I tell you, really. I think in that school-- that was a Gymnasium, famous Gymnasium in Poland, in Kielce, [POLISH].

[POLISH]?

Yeah. And--

[KNOCKING]

Can we cut for a second?

--how much was the Gymnasium.

OK. But what I do want to know is, did you have friends, then, who were not Jewish, who were Poles?

Yeah.

Good friends?

Yeah.

Your closest friends? Or maybe not your closest friends?

No. One was come from working class. He was very nice. And the other one, turned out-- when the war started, he declared himself a Volksdeutsche.

He was a Volksdeutsche?

Yeah.

And tell us--

You know the term?

I do. But tell people who don't know what it is. What is a Volksdeutsche in Poland?

That means that there was a Polish citizen of German origin called himself Polish until Germany invaded and said, I'm also German. So the government declared them to be called Volksdeutsche--

That's the German government.

--and belonged to the state nation of the Germans.

So this was like the Sudetendeutsche in Czechoslovakia.

Sudetendeutsche?

Were in Czechoslovakia.

Yeah.

Did you have any interactions with him after the German occupation?

No. No, because his father-- oh, I didn't think of that. He was a Secret Service. So, belonged to the Secret Service. It turns out-- at that time I didn't know. But a lot of things my brother knows because he stayed on. We had these Thursday night gatherings.

At your home?

At home. Most of them were fellow socialists, but also it was always done with entertainment. And my mother used to sing. I used to play the violin for her. And little did we know that every gathering was watched very closely by Mr. Slewinski.

Slewinski?

Yeah, the guy who was part of a Secret Service for the Polish people.

Not for the Germans.

No, because the Germans didn't come yet. But when the Germans came he became a Volksdeutsche. The same guy.

Same guy.

But I got to know his son. And I met him in the school. The son was OK.

I met somebody the other day who grew up in a German town. And they left Germany in 1936. But he had had many close friends before they left. And he experienced how, when Hitler came to power, one by one these friends fell away. And they weren't his friends anymore. And he was a young boy at the time. And this hurt very, very much.

And I asked him the same question that I'm going to ask you. He was a person who was-- who didn't see himself as any different in Germany until all this happened. He was a Jew, but he was a German. And so I said, what part of you is still German? In addition, the part of you that is Jewish. And my question to you is, was there any part of you that you identified with Poland, with Polish society, with Polish culture in addition to being a Jew?

The greatest Polish poet was Mickiewicz. The greatest poet was [? Slowacki. ?] The contemporary Polish poet-- I wish the name would come right away-- which I know happens to be Jewish, but he was very much recognized as a great Polish poet. And of course, he was very much popular among me and other fellow students who were interested in matters of culture. Of course, I loved Polish music of Chapelle.

Did you have history classes in Gymnasium on Polish history?

Oh, sure. Oh, yeah.

Was that something that you felt, they're talking about my country, or not so much?

Yeah. Yeah, there was-- I don't know, really, how to put it. I didn't realize fully-- analyze it. It has to do with a political outlook. But it was the acceptance of the idea that you are a Polish citizen.

You partake in best what the culture can offer to you both for the Polish side and for either side, Jewish side. It didn't prevent you from being very much involved in Russian literature. We read Gorky at that time. And then there are Tolstoy. And then I switched to French.

You become, as I said another time, worldly. The whole world was open to you. So we did not tend to put ourselves in

defined categories.

And by asking that question, I didn't want to do that. I was more or less just trying to get a sense of where did you feel affinity and in what ways you might have felt affinity-- or not. You might not have felt the affinity. And it's OK.

We're in a complicated part of the world. We're in a part of the world that is not homogeneous and where people have different experiences. And the countries themselves are not settled countries. They're also unstable in many ways. So it is an attempt to come to understand how a person sees themselves in the environment that they find themselves.

My answer to that is, it's very difficult when you are torn between so many interests, this way and that way. As a child, not being religious, I was fascinated by a Jewish Yiddish book called [YIDDISH].

[YIDDISH]?

What's the word? It escapes. From the Bible. [YIDDISH], remember. [YIDDISH] means folk tales of the Bible. As Jews you are free thinker. You do not accept everything.

That's right.

[INAUDIBLE] But these are all interesting things about Joseph. He was sold--

Yes, by his brothers.

--by his brothers. And there's Samson was defeated by-- all this. Part of the [YIDDISH]. A [YIDDISH] is a folk tale, a little story. It was not taken seriously, but because very much part of a tradition.

Yes.

Then I remember reading [YIDDISH].

Oh, yeah.

Not Fiddler on the Roof, which I did, which is Mendele Mocher Sforim-- that's another writer. It was called Yitzhak-- no. The Shabbos Zine, something like that. And it's a story about a little kid who was really the son of a rabbi.

It was written for nonbelievers. But it dealt with so many aspects of Jewish tradition. Sure, it appealed to me. It overshadowed other things. But I getting all these things from all the sides.

Let's turn, now, to September 1, 1939. September 1, 1939, do you remember where you were?

Yeah.

Where were you?

I was the balcony of our house. And I was holding onto a China dish with butter. Suddenly we hear a roar of train-- of planes. And a plane dropped a bomb right next to the house. Next thing I know, the dish split, shattered. I was holding. That was my very first experience--

Wow.

--of the--

Of the war.



I didn't know what it means.

What happened after that? Tell me how things developed for you, for your parents, for your brothers.

Within days the Germans occupied Kielce-- within days. We were talking about the young German--

[BANG]

You were talking about the young?

German boys.

Yeah.

Because they were marching in the German battalions.

Are you talking about the Volksdeutsche or just the regular soldiers?

No, the Germans.

Yeah, the Germans.

You look at them, they are so proud. They were wearing these boots. The Germans-- the Poles were dressed like the-- you can see some of the movies of the First World War, when they had some [NON-ENGLISH].

Rags around their feet.

Yeah. Oh, no, they had good boots. And they walked and they sang. And they walked and they sang very touchy soon-- very catchy tunes. Naturally, that makes a great appeal to the young Germans. They took pride of it. Then the Germans came with the motorcycles that were side--

Sidecars. With sidecars.

Yeah.

Can we--

Anyway.

So you're saying the Germans came with sidecars, motorcycles with sidecars.

Yeah.

And spiffy-looking soldiers with boots.

Yeah. And then passed. So in the meantime, they spread the Polish government, which were running away east. All the able-bodied males should the run east and go across the Vistula River, because the Polish government forces would set up a resistance there.

So this was the news from the Polish side, that that's what everybody should do.

Yeah. And we left my brother and youngest brother. My father and I and Alex start running east. And we run day and we run night. We couldn't carry on. But we manage, manage.

And in the meantime the German planes appeared overhead and started machine gun us. So we run quickly under a tree. And I remember so very vividly how the leaves kept falling on my head.

But we managed to reach the Vistula River. My father decided to go to Zawichost.

His hometown.

His hometown. When I arrived, turns out that the relative-- one of the relatives was killed by the Germans who were there before. But we still decided to cross the river.

We hired a boat to go across. As it was going across, we saw on the horizon burning something. Turns out it was the river-- the bridge in Sandomir that my father was registered when they got--

His documents.

His documents, yeah. So it was going up in the air.

Oh, it was being bombed? The bridge was being bombed?

The bridge went up. So then we finally crossed the river to a small town, peaceful town-- Zaklikow.

Zaklikow. And the Germans weren't there yet?

No. And we stayed and have a day or so. And suddenly, the remnants of Polish army made an appearance with the horses and artillery and so on. Made an appearance. At that point a plane appeared. Of course, it was German. They start shooting at the plane. And nothing. The plane disappeared, and so did the army.

Within a very short time, suddenly we hear the roar of planes. German planes made an appearance over the little town, Zaklikow, and started bombing it. These are all fire bombs. And the town went up in flames.

We ran quickly to the basement. We could smell smoke. We didn't know if it's gas or what. We ran up, grabbed some clothes or pieces of clothing, dip it into the water, over the face in case it's gas. But it wasn't.

Anyway, we see-- we feel the fires all around us. So we couldn't stay anymore. We ran out of the house and went to the nearest hill. We saw the town going up in flames.

The next day, everything was quiet. No more fire, because the smell went down. Where do we buy food? We came across ice cream parlor which was bombed. And the only waffles were scattered. So we start eating the waffles.

The sugar waffles.

Yeah.

That's the only food you found.

That was great. Oh, yeah, that was great. We were hungry. You eat worse than that, of course.

After several days we decided we might have to go back to Kielce.

To Kielce.

Meantime, someone told us that the Germans already were in Lublin, which is way beyond.

That's further east, isn't it?

Much further east.

So that's the point. They got on [INAUDIBLE]. Forget the Polish government and the resistance. So we went back to Kielce.

To your mother and your youngest brother.

Yeah.

And what did they have to say? What had been going on with them?

At that time that part of Poland was quiet. They were not bombed by anybody. Soon the Germans started organizing a ghetto.

But also, the ghetto was not organized right away. But the Jews now started being treated separately. They couldn't eat or purchase food in the common places. And within days the Gestapo, secret service-- German secret service took a dozen Jews as-- what's the word? I keep forgetting.

Hostage?

Hostage. In case something happens to the German soldier. So they kept the soldier-- hostages, including my father, for, what, a week? After a week they let them go home. They took another batch of hostages.

In the meantime, I considered myself Polish looking, not Jewish. So I managed to sneak into the Polish part to get food. And I was quite successful. Not Alex. Alex looked too much Jewish. He had no chance. But I felt all right.

To continue the story--

Please.

--by September-- no, October, November. Yeah, the end of November the Gestapo came and arrested my father. And this time not the hostage, but the socialist. Meantime, they got the list--

Of course.

--of all the socialists and communists and so on. They arrested him. And after one day they released him. He didn't go back home. He was told by friends, the Gestapo will pick you up tomorrow and send you to a concentration camp. So instead he stayed outside. My mother remained in the old place. And he decided to go cross the border into East Poland.

Why was there a border in East Poland?

Which was at that time occupied by the Germans-- by the Russians.

Now can you explain, how did it come that the Russians occupied part of Poland when it was the Germans who invaded?

Back to history. Before December 1--

September 1.

September 1. A couple months before that the Western powers tried to induce the Soviet Union to join the West. Stalin decided it wouldn't work. They didn't like Léon Blum. You remember Léon Blum? [INAUDIBLE], the French leaders, Chamberlain. And the Russians concluded their friendship treaties-- first non-aggression, then the friendship

treaty between the Soviet Union and Germany-- that was before the war.

August 23.

And they set up an agreement that's called the Ribbentrop-Molotov--

Molotov.

--Agreement where they decided that Germany will occupy the bulk of Poland and the Russians will take the eastern part, incorporated into the Soviet Union, which at that time was Ukraine. Ukraine was never considered a separate country.

When my father was told that you'd better run for your life he decided to run east, to Lvov-- Lemberg, L'viv, all the names. And he decided to take me primarily because we were also told that the Russians allowed the Polish schools to reopen at Lemberg, in Lwow. So he took me with me.

So that you could go to school.

So I could go to school. That was the primary modification.

And you left your mother and your two brothers behind?

Right.

Did you ever come back to Kielce after that?

That's another long story.

You mean after the war, or did you come back to Kielce--

When the war started-- ended.

So in other words, when you left Kielce at that point you were gone for the duration of the war.

I didn't know. I was--

You didn't know that at the time.

No. My father and I hired a buggy and a horse and put another friend on it, too. And my mother found an occasion to live in a small house on the way out of Kielce. And I remember my mother was standing on the steps waving at us, at me. And a thought occurred to me right then and there-- I may not see her again. And that's what happened.

That was the last time.

Yeah.

Tell me quickly, if you can, what happened to her?

The story of the-- what's referred to as liquidation of Kielce, Jewish area started in gradual ways. First of all, my mother, Alex, and Henius--

This time Alex stayed.

Yeah.

And the ticket out of the apartment-- we had a very nice, modern apartment after we sold that beautiful--

House.

--American-style building, house. To the other house in the ghetto. The Germans set up a ghetto. This ghetto started shrinking all the time. So it has to move one place, to another, to another one. I have to make it very short, because that's already a very touchy thing. But, well, my mother was moving from one place to another in Kielce. Germany was in peace with Russia.

And she-- before that she wrote letters through which she found out her youngest brother, Jakob, was in Russia. She sent Polish letters to him. And I, by the way, have copies of it, of the actual letters that she sent to them. She describes how she moved from one apartment to another apartment.

She does realize the significance of what she's doing. And she bemoaned the fact that a son-- me-- doesn't know where he is. Last time she heard about me was that the Germans-- the Russians picked me up.

Then, in the meantime, in June 21, 1941, all the correspondence seized. The Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June '41. And soon after the Russians went to Russia, they had the help of the local population, of the Ukrainians, the Lithuanians.

They start setting up the Germans, started setting up liquidation centers. At that time they were referred to as workplaces. And you didn't know, really, what-- or they didn't know. And we, being in the Soviet Union, we met-- we knew even much less, of course-- until July '42. After sending thousands of Jews from the ghetto, pack them into freight trains to a work place, supposedly, they picked up my mother, Alex, my brother, and the youngest brother. Took them to a train.

But the work-- the Germans also needed some workforce. So they said to my mother and youngest brother-- they packed them into the train. And you, Alex, stay behind. You collect whatever you can. They had dead bodies that would start letting out gold from the mouth of dead people. And they engaged Alex to do that.

To take gold from the mouths of dead people?

Yeah. And Alex saw that my mother and the younger brother packed on that train. And that train went towards Treblinka, which is not a workplace.

No.

Was an extermination camp. And that's where they died.

And that was, then, the last time he saw them, was when they were on that train.

Yeah.

And you learnt of this when you met Alex after the war?

Yeah. He told me once.

Only once?

Yeah.

I'm sorry. I know that was difficult. But I appreciate you telling it to us.

That's the story.

Let's go, now, to what happened to you. You go to Lvov with your father. And what happens? Do you find a school?

I went to that school.

You went to a school in Lvov?

Lvov.

Lvov.

It was cold, bitter. Not enough food. And I developed, obviously, [NON-ENGLISH], some kind of infection of my blood. I was peeing day and night, and tried to eat, and tried to do this, tried to do that. I didn't have enough clothing. People managed to steal all the money I had. I had a whole battery of bottles under my bed where I had to pee.

Oh, my.

In order to go to the bathroom I had to go through a very cold marble floor to the end of a hall, maybe another floor down to go to the toilet. It was just impossible. But I know I was not the only one. That's how it was.

Was this a dormitory?

It was a school, but they made a dormitory. So that's [INAUDIBLE] this and that. But let me just add, in spite all this it was a very stimulating time of my life.

Really? You were sick. You were cold.

And yet I have-- I was so excited by all the people that I just met. They came from Warsaw, from Poland, from this, from that. A lot of them were very well read. We had long discussions. Meantime, we had to get in touch with the Russians themselves, Russian soldiers.

What impression did they make?

Pardon me?

What impression did the Russian soldiers make on you?

The guys that I met were very unpretentious. In addition, don't forget that was the Red Army. The Red Army didn't believe in these old-fashioned capitalistic symbols of generals and colonels and so on. All ranks were eliminated. Red Army-- that's Trotsky, really, his creation. So you were the head of a division, you were the head of the battalion, and so on. These are the Russian soldiers.

The ones I came across-- very nice, and tried their best to speak. I tried also the Russian. I picked up a lot of the Russians. They learned a little Polish. And the exchange was very nice, very pleasant, I must say. Later on-- but that's another story.

The experiences I had in dealing with ordinary Russians-- when I was in a labor camp in Siberia I found the ordinary Russians very pleasant, very willing to help, to be of help to you as much as they could. Just to give you an example, because to me that's such an important part of my life, the Russians at that time celebrated two holidays, May 1 and October 6, the time of revolution-- Lenin's revolution, to be exact. That's when people were free to do what you could.

But I was in Siberia, Eastern Siberia. That's one of the worst parts. And suddenly, the Russians appeared. These were people who had some important positions in the Russian industry, which at that time, in that place-- gold digging

industry.

They came to our camps, to each one of us. Hey, [NON-ENGLISH]-- you know, the Russian name. What can I do for you? They brought us vodka. Come to the house. They took us-- took me to one house and gave me the food that they had, which was quite a treat.

What else do you need? I said, just one thing that I need. I need socks. Socks. Because I didn't have any socks. I didn't have anything to keep my feet warm. I had to use newspapers. I had to-- everything. And he [INAUDIBLE].

And that was when you were in Siberia?

Yeah.

Were you still in a labor camp when that happened?

Yeah. That was in the labor camp.

So you were still a prisoner in the labor camp.

Yeah. But that was the free day. Most likely the-- must have been May 1.

I've never heard of that before, that someone-- I mean, when people were freed already from the labor camps that they could be invited somewhere.

Well, maybe not-- it needs some explanation. The prisoners in Siberia had different categories. First of all there were criminal--

Criminal.

Criminal and political. Each one has sentence for long terms. But what do the Russians do with qualified mechanics, engineers, and so on, rich peasants?

Gulags.

They call them gulags. You know that?

Mm-hmm.

You know a lot.

I will say a phrase that sometimes people joke about in Russian-- [RUSSIAN]. You know that one?

Yeah.

But I say it in joking.

Yeah.

So anyway, gulags--

In Russian another expression was [RUSSIAN].

[RUSSIAN]. What does that mean?

That means cabbage soup and kasha-- you know.

[INAUDIBLE]?

Yeah. Is our food, [RUSSIAN]. And you are lucky if you get it.

That's right.

Anyway, so where was I?

You were talking about how it comes that you have different categories of prisoners in Russia.

Oh, yeah, different categories. So if you were a minor political prison-- minor meaning not more than five or eight years--

I see.

--in prison they sent you to Siberia, first of all, because whoever they could they sent to workplaces. My father was sent to Volgastroi.

Volgastroi.

Volgastroi is they're building a dam for an electric station. And I was sent to Eastern Siberia, where they-- primarily it was gold mining.

And so were you a minor-- were you a political or a criminal prisoner?

I was too young to give any sentence.

You didn't even get a sentence?

No. I never got a sentence. But nevertheless, look, we are talking about Stalin. We're talking about communism as practiced at that time. Legality didn't exist at that time. People don't realize that. I try to tell them. Some people, they won't believe it. Anyway.

Can I share another joke with you?

Yeah.

Two prisoners meet in the gulag. They were friends back in the old village. And one says, fancy meeting you here. How many years did you get? He goes, I got 25 years. What did you do? He says, I did nothing. And the other prisoner says, that's impossible. For nothing you only get 10 years.

That's a good one. Yeah. That's how it is. Very, very, very much appropriate.

So but we wanted to find out-- we started this whole thing because you were telling me about--

About the Russians.

--the warm-heartedness of the Russians. And I was surprised that a prisoner would be allowed to go and have food with them.

Once you finish you-- what's called [RUSSIAN].



What's [RUSSIAN]?

Census. They didn't send you back home. They want you to stay in Siberia and help to build it, or find some work for them.

So is this when you-- this particular incident when you're invited into these people's homes, is this after 1941 and 1942? Is this after the Germans invade the Soviet Union?

Yeah, more or less that time, yeah.

The reason why I ask this-- and I'm jumping ahead in our story-- is that people who were from Poland and deported to the Soviet Union were released from the camps.

Later, later. That comes later.

Later. That comes later. OK. So this was before you were released from the camp.

Correct.

So we can-- that incident is clear, now, in my mind, that there was still some flexibility. It's a holiday. It's a free day. It's not the same thing as being in the [RUSSIAN]. It's not the same thing as being--

No. No, no, no. Not only that, yes. So I was given the job to cut trees with a saw, with the help of some other guy. And then I had to split it. It was used for to build the mine supports and for burning. And then I was lucky to-- but in the meantime, of course, it's winter. I was very lucky to get a job as a helper to a smith. Smith.

To a smithy.

Another very nice Russian man. He was there because he murdered somebody. But once he's finished his [RUSSIAN], as they call it, he was in charge of that. I was obviously strong enough to become a-- what's called in Polish-- in Russian [RUSSIAN].

What's that, a [RUSSIAN]?

Well, it's a boy. I don't know. [RUSSIAN]-- But I was holding a very heavy mallet. And he was warming pieces of metal in the furnace. And he, of course, he knew what to do. He turned it. He put the proper size of another form on top of the very hot metal. And my idea was to hit it.

Pound it.

It was nice. It was warm. I had a very relationship with him. Very pleasant guy. And I worked and I worked and I worked until I collapsed.

It was that hard.

Well, obviously. I don't know. I don't remember details. What I do remember is they took me to a hospital some distance away. The head of the hospital was a fellow which turned out to be-- as it turned out to be, Jewish.

He said to me, we'll take care of you. And what I remembered-- the most delightful things that I could eat. Is a-- how do you call it?

Porridge of some kind?

Yeah, [INAUDIBLE] Well, actually, that was the most important thing. And they say, look, you also have that problem.

You have a tapeworm. Tapeworm. Don't worry about that. We'll take care of it. I got rid of that, too.

So you had a doctor who took care of you.

Oh, yeah.

While you're a prisoner.

Yeah. Well, I was in the hospital.

You were in hospital. But it was a real hospital, not a fake hospital.

Oh, no, no.

No.

It's a real hospital. Primitive, of course. I don't know if they had any X-rays. Who knows.

But you know something, I want to step back, because we got off track. And I want to bring us back on track. The last we know in our story is that you are in a school in Lvov and you are having some interactions that are pleasant with the Russian soldiers. And then you wanted to tell me about the Siberian experience of being invited by Russians. But what we don't know at this point is, how do you go from being somebody who is a socialist sympathizer in Lvov with-- having a nice experience with Russian soldiers to becoming a prisoner in a labor camp? What happens?

First of all, we spent about eight weeks on a train to go to Siberia.

How did you get on that train?

They took was there.

Why did they take you?

Because I-- we came from Western Poland.

Oh, and so that made you somehow or other criminal? I'm being provocative. You realize--

There's no-- I simply didn't belong there. I didn't have any passport. I didn't belong. So they collected all the people who came from Western Poland and sent them in different places all over the Soviet Union.

What about your father? Did he go with you?

They picked up my father some days before. I tried to find out where he is. Maybe I can join him. Forget it. Nobody knows where he is. And so on. Then I was told that you two were picked up by the NKVD.

Tell us, who were the NKVD?

Pardon me?

Who were the NKVD?

The secret service.

So like the Gestapo for the Germans, this is for the Russians?

Right. And yeah, they had the separate-- different uniforms, different cap.

Were they as friendly as the ordinary Russian soldiers?

First of all, you didn't talk to them, they didn't talk to you. And then when we found out-- we meaning all the young kids in that school. We found out who made the allegation to see a famous Polish writer who was a sympathizer with the Russian communists. We were admitted to her, and she had assured us, don't worry, you can stay where you are.

Oh, so in other words, you were worried that you may be taken away.

Right. And that time happened, for about a week or so, I slept in the garden because the rumors were that they come early in the morning and pick the things up. So I didn't sleep at the regular place. After seeing her-- Vasilevska, her name was.

Vasilevska.

Vasilevska. We went back. We slept in the dormitory, on our planks-- beds. In the morning the NKVD came, pick us all up.

So she didn't know what she was talking about.

Right. She assured us-- maybe she thought she will try the best. But maybe there's another day. But that was right away the next day.

What were the trains like that you were put into?

These were freight trains that you keep cattle in. Each-- by then the Russians had long experience in transporting thousands of prisoners on these trains. Each wagon have a sliding door. No windows.

And in the middle they managed to [? put ?] a hole, some kind of a enclosure, which is OK with only men. Except in this particular case, that train was for the ordinary people-- men, women, children. And all were packed in a whole line of wagons.

Who else was being taken? What other kinds of people were being-- were in that train? Were they all from Western Poland?

I would say yes, yeah.

Were they all Jews?

At that time, people that I got to know, yes. But later on there were a lot of Poles, too. They went for another reason, but yeah, there were a lot of them. I deal with that as a separate item altogether.

OK. We'll do that. We'll do that.

So here I am on the train. At this rate I'll go on and on and on for weeks, probably.

I know. I know. But we'll get there. So you're on a train. You stay there for weeks on this train, yes?

Yeah. And we are not let out. We have to use that hole. And we're waiting. Train goes for 10 hours, stops in the middle of the night. Say time, out. And they bring us some soup, [NON-ENGLISH], like I mentioned before.

A cabbage soup?

Cabbage soup. And back to the train. If you want to pee or a BM, the best you could do is go quickly under the train. And that's what I did. After about, I would say, five weeks, six weeks maybe, we finally reached the Urals. These are the mountains separates Europe from Asia.

Did anyone tell you where you were going?

No. Oh, no.

Did anyone tell you why you were being put on the train?

No. No.

No. So you have no idea.

No. We have no idea.

Did you have any documents on you, any pass, any ID, any anything?

As a kid, I didn't have any documents. Nobody asked me for documents. But I had some photographs, I believe-- not many. When I arrived in the Urals-- the name of a town was Ufa.

Ufa.

They let us out of standing some time in the train. They let us out. What do I do first thing? I faint.

Oh.

After a minute, after some time a woman, a Russian woman, comes over, gives me some water to drink and says, this is life. [SPEAKING RUSSIAN]

But the translation was, if you don't survive it then you [RUSSIAN]. [RUSSIAN] is referring to the way a dog dies.

I see. So it's not just how a human dies, but how a dog dies.

Yeah.

So if you don't survive this you will die like--

But nevertheless, she gave me some water.

I see.

And put us back on the train for another several weeks. By that time we are deeper into Siberia already, and going on and on and on. And we could now go out and use the facility, which means the siding--

That's right.

--until we arrived. And it's a small railway station which is about west of Khabarovsk. Everyone out. And there were trucks. We had boarded the trucks. And they gave us herring to eat. It was delicious. But of course, you need a lot of water, too. So we went north, about 800 kilometers--

Still?

--when I looked this up later on, until they brought us to a new location where-- not far from the Lena River.

That's pretty far north.

Very north, yeah. Very far north. It's way past-- you must have heard of Irkutsk.

Oh, yeah.

You remember the Baikal River-- I mean--

Lake Baikal.

Yeah, Lake Baikal. But it was way, way up.

So it was cold there.

Yeah. Later on I found out at that time-- at least that time, the center, North Pole of coldness was a place called Oymyakon.

Oymyakon?

Yeah, which is in that area. And the [INAUDIBLE] took several people. They took me along with three other guys from my school.

How old were you?

Well, that was 1940. I was 17. [INAUDIBLE] was one of the kids that I became very friendly with, and another guy, a tall guy, and another one, very religious, which I never liked. In addition to these four young men were three old, very fine Czech Jewish gentlemen from the upper classes. And one of them, at least, had a very important position managing the railroad in Czechoslovakia.

And how did they end up there?

I don't know, really, why-- the Germans exiled them to Poland, to Lvov.

That means when they took over Czechoslovakia, you mean?

Yeah.

And there was also Polish-- a Czech Polish judge. I remember he was very important at that time, because he was allowed--

[PHONE RINGING]

Can we cut? Excuse me.

You were saying another Polish kid who was--

And two brothers. Very nice guy. They belonged to a sect, very rare in Poland, of the

Jehovah's Witnesses.

Yeah. But that's very-- such fine young man. And there were artists. They did some beautiful carving. And that helped me in a sense. They managed to carve bread stamps that we could use. Gave me one, gave my father one.

Your father was with you? You said your father was somewhere else.

Not right away, yeah. But he was in a labor camp. And when he found out that I am in Eastern Siberia where the Germans occupied that part, he managed to run away.

So they made false stamps for ration cards, is that it?

Yeah, for bread.

Important. Very important.

Well, you do everything to survive.

Of course. Of course. So there you are. You're taken to the far north, near the Lena River. And you have this group of you assembled. And where--

So the group I just mentioned to you-- there were three of these. Three young guys and then three old Jews were all put into one room, one large-- It's really a very primitive structure. It was also, of course, a log-- made of logs.

The problem is, the German-- no, the Russians didn't bother to do any insulation. The spaces between were open to the outside. During the summer it's OK. Comes winter, all the cold air comes in.

Would snow get in there, too?

And then came snow. Anyway, so we were busy finding anything that we could find on the ground to stuff into the spaces.

Was there a fence? Were you in a prison camp?

No.

Was there a fence around there?

No. That part was not. That part--

Wasn't there a danger you'd run away?

They didn't worry about it. It was a lot of wolves around, and Manchurian tigers. It was very dangerous to go out.

So you were near a woods. You were near a forest.

Oh, yes. Yeah, wood was surrounded. No farms. But yeah, we are cutting the trees. And then I was asked to go to one of these mines.

Now, who ran the camp? Who was in charge of the camp?

The secret service.

So it was the NKVD.

Yeah.

The secret police.

Yeah.

And did they, at that point, tell you why you were there?

Oh, no.

Did they ever come and-- were they people who would-- were they guarding you every day?

These guys, of course they belonged to the police. And I can only talk about the one particular guy because they didn't have so many people assigned to the camps. But there was one. He was suffering from CTB. He got in love-- fell in love with one of the girls. He was very, very nice. But there's nothing he can do. He was part of a secret service.

When you say secret service it sounds like what--

Yes.

A secret police is what I understood the NKVD to be.

Yeah, yeah. He had a revolver and he had a rifle. But he didn't think of using it. There was no need to use it.

Were there people who died along the way? When you describe this journey that took so many weeks--

Not in that place. Other peoples did. And these three guys--

The old ones from Czechoslovakia?

Yeah. I think all three of them died. It was just too much for them. Not enough food, not-- they didn't use to have work, hard work. And I did. So I managed. I felled trees and I collect wood. I help this and that.

And then one of things that I was getting some nice soup is among the people, there's a mother and a daughter. She couldn't work, but she was nevertheless kept there. And we were giving the understanding I will split wood for her, bring it over, and she will make a soup for me.

It sounds harsh, but it also sounds like there was a lot of signs of humanity in different places that you could find.

Absolutely.

From what you're telling.

Yeah. Oh, yes.

That it wasn't relentless, like some experiences could be.

You're dealing with human beings. Most of them were victims of the regime. What I didn't tell you-- a couple years later, when they allowed us to leave, we went to a town called-- the name escapes.

It's OK.

It'll come to me. It's very important. It's a very important town to me. Oh, yeah. You come across people, and most of them people in Siberia were victims. And my father and I got very, very friendly with a couple and his younger daughter. And he was a very important communist in Beloslovakia-- Belarussia.

Belarus. Belarussia.

Minsk. Very important. He was arrested. Of course, he was part of the opposition to Stalin. He was sent to Siberia. But he was such a devoted communist before that. His first born son was called Marlen.

Marlen?

Yeah.

It sounds like a girl's name, like Marlina.

Yeah, except that "Mar" is Marx, and "len" is Lenin.

Oh, that can be devotion. That can be devotion, yes.

And his daughter's name was Iskra.

Iskra?

Iskra is a sparkle. And why sparkle? Because that was the first newspaper that Lenin organized when he was in Switzerland. It shows you how devoted he was.

That's right.

And then he came out of the whole experience very much mentally affected. Still I remember many, many things. I remember details. And he met his wife. She was a wonderful woman.

And he took the courage of they both to tell us a little bit of the details of what's called in Russian [RUSSIAN]. You clean up. Clean ups-- when all the opposition to Stalin is either executed or sent to Siberia. And he was one of them.

And somehow he managed to lose his-- war started, and he lost his papers on purpose. And he managed to find his wife. And they were together. The name of the town is Barnaul.

Ah, Barnaul. Barnaul.

Barnaul.

When you experienced these things yourself, having come from an environment that was-- in Kielce, my understanding, it was mostly intellectual. It wasn't direct experience. It was having read things, having talked about things. Coming from this Polish environment, was this a shock for you? Was this a surprise for you, to find out what it all meant?

As I said, my father was a Bundist, a Jewish socialist. He knew about the Soviet Union.

He knew, OK.

To him what happened-- he didn't know the details. Later on I started reading and I got to know all the details. And I met this couple. They're talking with such great affection about Bukharin. Bukharin was one of the first that Stalin got rid of.

That's right. That's right.

And he says, everyone's so fond of Bukharin. Even Lenin called him [? Bukharinchek. ?] Anyway, this is one of the details he told me about. Later on I start reading books-- Darkness at Noon.

Ah, yeah. Koestler. Arthur Koestler.



Yeah.

What was his name, this man's name? Do you remember?

The name in the book?

No, no, no. I'm talking about this man who was the high party leader in Belarus, whose son was Marlen and whose daughter was Iskra. What was his name?

I don't remember.

It's OK.

I wish I would remember. Of course, I feel in love with Iskra.

Did you?

But she was too young. So I said, if you could wait a little bit, and I will get [? older. ?] I'll marry her. But in the meantime, the war came to an end, and so on.

So let's go to this part. You are in the forests and you're cutting trees. Do you ever find out-- is that the place where you find out that Germany has attacked the Soviet Union in June, 1941?

Yeah.

Does that change your life at all, the fact that Germany and the Soviet Union are now no longer allied but are enemies? Does that impact your status?

Being in Siberia, being removed from Poland and its authorities, it takes a long time until the news manages to affect the people. So my father-- we were wondering what's happening to our family. And we left. It took some time to find out.

What did you find out?

The Russians kept the news of extermination camps until they finally entered Poland and they couldn't deny. And the first town they came across was called Majdanek. That was the first liberated Polish town where the Jews eliminated.

Why would they keep news of this secret? It's in their political interest to make German atrocities known.

They didn't care. Well, They were concentrating on German atrocities about the Russian people.

Ah.

And Jews is a just side product-- byproduct. They kept it as a secret until they couldn't do it anymore. And they're the ones who liberated Auschwitz.

Yes.

It's Russia's.

That's right.

So we didn't know until way after. But of course, we're constantly thinking, what about us? What about my mother? We were already in Poland when we found out. But that's another story.

Well, that's closer to the end. What I wanted to find out is, in 1941, when the Soviet Union is attacked by Nazi Germany, you were still a prisoner. And through that attack-- you say it takes a long time for things to get to Siberia. Does your status change, yours and your father's? In what way does it change?

Everything involves a little bit-- a bit of history. The Polish government before the war and the Russians were not on the best terms.

No.

The Poles didn't forgive the Russians for taking away a good part of Poland, even they couldn't do anything about it. The Germans were already a given. Nevertheless, under the pressure of Western allies the Poles set up a temporary government in exile in London and made the Russians recognize it as representing the Polish citizens, who are now under the occupation of Germany and in Siberia.

Ah. So it was the Soviets who were-- had to recognize this government in exile.

Right. At that time, America stepped in and started sending packages to survivors.

Jewish survivors?

All the survivors. But of course, at that time, the primary survivors were Jews, yes.

You're talking-- the Americans stepped in and sent them to Poland or to Siberia? Where were these packages being sent?

They were sent from the United States to Murmansk.

To Soviet Union.

Soviet Union. From there, they started traveling and being distributed every place.

So it would have been to anybody who was a Polish citizen.

The Polish government-- that's America. The Polish government made a special effort to take care of its citizens. So as being a Polish citizen, I was giving, once a month, a separate package with sugar and, what I couldn't forget-- it was the most delicious thing-- condensed milk.

Ah.

Oh, when I got condensed milk [INAUDIBLE]. But sugar-- the moment I got the sugar I started eating it right away.

All of the sugar? Just plain sugar?

I put the newspaper on the floor-- on the table, start eating the sugar. And I finish it all.

Oh my goodness.

But not my father. He also got his sugar.

But you weren't released from camp.

[DOORBELL]

Can we cut, please?

So you eat all the sugar that you get in these packages.

Yeah. But my father decided to melt the sugar. He made a caramel.

Caramel.

And he-- of course, the only thing to drink was tea. Very good.

That must have been nice tea, tasty.

Very nice tea. And he had cut off a piece of caramel.

We have to cut again.

Now, and then--

So whenever I went to my father I had tea. I always had a piece of the caramel.

Who would have thought?

So I was-- he was sharing the caramel with me until the next shipment of sugar. But in the meantime I managed to eat it all.

Well, that would have been great for diabetes, don't you think?

[LAUGHTER]

Who cares about that?

Who cared? Who cared? So when you got-- just to give me a sense, when you got that first shipment, that first thing of sugar, how much did you eat at one time?

I don't know, whatever they sent us.

Was it a cup? Was it two cups? Was it a pound?

I would say close to a pound.

A pound of sugar.

A lot.

A lot.

A lot, yeah.

A lot.

But I did--

You needed food.

That's the only nourishment I had.

Yeah. Yeah But you still were prisoners, is that correct, after this? You still were prisoners in the camps?

No. At that time I wouldn't use the word prisoner.

What would you use?

Exiled with a very limited freedom of movement. And being that I was so striving to get more education, availed myself of an educational facility in Barnaul. And I enrolled what's called a [NON-ENGLISH].

So at some point you are transferred or you move from the place in the woods--

Moved. Yeah.

--to Barnaul.

To Barnaul.

When did that happen? And why did that happen?

Well, the life in Eastern Siberia was unbearable. They didn't grow anything. I've come across a field where there was obviously experimental potato growing. And I managed to steal some of it. And we tried-- we were given the freedom to leave that place and go down south.

So here is the point that I wanted to see if it's the correct point. Was it the result of the Polish government's and exiles' negotiation with Stalin that you were released from prison, from the labor camp? When you say you got freedom, was that a result of it?

Most likely.

Was there an announcement given to you?

No.

Did you know that all of a sudden--

Nothing.

--this person stays because he's not a Polish citizen, but I am a Polish citizen, and I can leave?

Right. Well, yeah. Of course, it wasn't simple as that, because you can't just decide to leave. You don't buy a ticket and you go. So you have to release this and this and that.

Do you have to get permission to leave?

You have to find permission. You have to have the means of traveling, because that was Siberia. There are no railroads, no bus fare, like that. So you see, was this opportunity to attach yourself to some kind of a shipment of trucks.

And do you remember how you left, what was the means of transportation?

It was a truck.

It was a truck.

Yeah. Now, truck-- it was the winter. And the trucks could do very well because the roads were frozen.

Frozen.

Wintertime-- I mean, summertime there was so much mud it's impossible to travel. So you always waited for the winter.

So you went from this camp to Barnaul.

Well, no, not quite. We went from that camp, which is about 600, 800 kilometers north of the trans-Siberian railroad to the next station on the railroad. There we waited opportunity to board a train going west.

And it took us-- we had to register. And eventually-- and it took us several weeks waiting there and waiting to be allowed to go to another train and go west. We decided to go west but didn't want to go too far west because that was the time when German forces were fighting the Russians in Stalingrad.

Which was a very key battle.

It was the--

Key battle.

--key battle at that time. And most of the Jews that I knew we came across decided to go all the way south-- Kazakhstan, Kirghistan, Uzbekistan, all the other places. But we decided, my father and I, we wouldn't go that far because we also heard there are different kinds of illnesses, epidemics.

It's true.

So we didn't go as far south as Barnaul, which is south of Novosibirsk. On the railroad, came to Barnaul.

And you stayed there.

And we stayed there.

Did you stay there till the end of the war?

Yeah.

And once you got to Barnaul, what kind of work did you do? How did you feed yourselves?

I was always looking for opportunity to study. It drove me constantly. So they opened another [NON-ENGLISH]. The one that I mentioned before was electromechanical [RUSSIAN]. This one was textile [RUSSIAN] because a big factory in Barnaul was weaving clothes for uniforms for the Russian army. So they let me join.

Was this like a high school or was this like a college, a community college type of thing?

Yeah, you could say a community college, yes. I was the only boy, only man.

Really? You must have been popular.

I don't know.

[LAUGHTER]

But anyway, that was-- I have not complained about all these places because I always try to make the best of it, because

that [RUSSIAN] had some exciting teachers. There was a famous poet who was kicked out of Western Russia. She was a colleague of Mayakovsky. I don't know if you--

Really? The poet?

Yeah. Oh, yeah, so his teaching was reciting Russian poetry. I mean, how different this is from the things that I learned until that time. But everything was exciting.

Well, many people say that because so many interesting, creative people were exiled to Siberia and the East that these cities became intellectual centers.

[INAUDIBLE] and even in a little town like that, my two favorite teachers-- both of them were officers of the Russian army.

The Russian Soviet army or the SARS army?

SARS army. I don't know actually what they did and how they found themselves in Siberia, but these are extremely well-read, intelligent people. From one, I found out about the great American construction in the water. What's the name?

Oh, Hoover Dam?

Yeah. Hoover Dam. I mean, he told me. He told me all the details about it.

In Nevada.

Yeah. And the other one knew everything.

Well, the Hoover Dam is right near Las Vegas, an hour outside of Las Vegas.

Yeah, of course, but he--

So it must be--

He knew about it. He knew about this. He knew about other things, too. The other one lost his arm in the army. And he always carried all his papers underneath that stump that he had. What a nice guy, too. He was an officer. And the way they spoke the language--

Russian.

Russian. The knowledge they conveyed-- I mean, what I learned about physics, mathematics. Did you ever hear of Napier logarithms?

Gosh, no.

It's a specialty mathematics. One of the teachers, he was a mathematician. So he knew about that. So he told us exactly how to do it. And that helped me to impress some of the ladies in [? Esplanade ?] when we went to see the film-- I forget the name. It's a well-known film. Oh, Infinity.

Infinity?

Yeah. So I remember, I saw the film, so I said, by the way, do you know what infinity is?

[LAUGHTER]

So I had to explain what I knew about infinity and how do you arrive at undetermined numbers, and so a lot of things. How can you tell, is a number is a primary number? So I impressed the ladies that I knew. I'd say, give me a number. So they gave me a number. Oh, that's a primary number. How do you know? Well-- and I told them.

And they were impressed?

Yeah.

Well, that's a good reason to take mathematics, let me tell you.

[LAUGHTER]

If nothing else.

If nothing else.

[INAUDIBLE]

So what did your father do? You were in [RUSSIAN]. What was your father doing?

The director of the school-- obviously, I managed to persuade him to find a good job for my father. So he was given the position of the head of the distribution of whatever they had-- the clothing, fabrics.

What kind of living quarters did you have?

Well, I'll tell you about that. And I'm not so sure you should know that.

No?

But it was a big factory. Thousands of people occupied it and so on. But the living was so primitive. To go to the toilet you had to go outdoors. But outdoors, what do you do wintertime?

You don't go.

Well, I mean--

[LAUGHTER]

I know. Of course. Of course.

What do you do?

What do you do? That's my question. What do you do?

I'll tell you the details, but I'm not sure that you will like to remember.

All right. Let me hear it.

I don't know if the young people know. You go to the pile of frozen manure and you add, you--

You add your bit to it.

Yeah. Until an hour later, it's all frozen. And it keeps growing and growing all winter long, until springtime.

Well, that was my question. What happens when spring comes?

Springtime, it's soft. People come with trowels, with spades and so on, and got rid of it.

Primitive. Primitive.

But yeah, yeah, survive everything. [INAUDIBLE].

Did you live in a--

I don't think think this is very important.

Did you live in a barracks?

Sort of. Yeah. No.

Or dormitory? A dormitory?

Yeah.

Did many people live in dormitories?

Oh, yeah.

Or most people live in dormitories?

Yeah, the workers and the students, all the young people. And they all had numbers. And so you knew you lived in this number. And then you go there to that number.

And were you more or less an equal person with everyone else there, or was there some mark on you from the labor camp that still made a difference?

No, I feel quite equal.

Did you experience any anti-Semitism when you were there?

I'll just tell you one little accident-- incident. Not from the local population. But in the meantime, war was going on. The Russians moved west more and more until they came to Ukraine, especially Western Ukraine. Western Ukraine was known as anti-Russia.

Yes.

And the Western Ukrainians even organized their own army. They had divisions that worked with Hitler until the Russians came. And they picked up whatever they-- whoever they could. But what do you do with hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians? But they packed them in trains and moved them to Siberia.

As I was moving from Eastern Siberia to Western Siberia I came across trains coming from the Western-- from Eastern--

From west to east.

Yeah. I got to know a Ukrainian family-- not a family, really, a boy-- in Barnaul. We discovered we have what in common? We just loved Schubert.



Schubert?

Yeah.

Music.

He loved Schubert. I loved Schubert. And we sang, and we exchange whatever we could. So we became very good friends. One day he says to me, Jozio, don't worry. My father and his friends are conspiring. If the Germans come further east, we're going to take care of all the Jews. But you're safe. Remember, I'll take of it. With that assurance--

Made you feel a lot safer.

Anyway-- but he meant well.

Yeah.

He meant-- yeah, he really wanted to be of help to me. But it indicates--

Yes, of course.

But as I said--

Yes, of course.

--it was limited to those people who came from Ukraine, primarily. And then later on, as it turned out, also from Belarusia and the Baltic states, too-- all of them. When you read about Wilno-- just the other day, I was talking about [INAUDIBLE]. These are collaborators with Hitler, a lot of them.

And that, of course, brings me to another the topic. But that's something that may take an hour. And that is pogrom in Kielce.

Well, this is what I want to go to. This is what I want to go to.

We have time?

Yeah. If you have time, I have time.

I have time.

How about the boys? Ask them if they're supposed to go.

Hang on a second. Let's take a break.

It sounds like your time in Barnaul was actually quite a positive time when you were able to go to [NON-ENGLISH], you were able to study with such teachers. Your father had a more or less secure job. You had food.

Well, we grew our own potatoes.

You grew your own potatoes.

Oh, yeah. That was a routine every day. We cooked several potatoes together.

That was the staple.

Oh, yeah.

That was it.

Nothing else.

Did you find--

And once in a while we're getting some condensed milk.

Were you getting packages from those American shipments in Barnaul?

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Did they continue those shipments until the end of the war?

No, I don't know. It stopped at some time.

It stopped at some time. Did you ever make contact with your Uncle Jakob, who was also in-- Jacob, who was also in the Soviet Union? Your mother's brother?

No. I didn't know--

He was there?

--that he was alive. I didn't know about that, that my mother used to sing--

Write to him?

Send him letters. I also didn't know the existence of my uncle, his brother-- Moishe.

Moishe.

It's another story how we met. To make it really short--

Did you meet in the Soviet Union or in Poland again?

No, no. We met when we were [INAUDIBLE] traveling from Poland. After arriving there, spending some time, and we decided Poland is not anymore for the Jews. We decided to go to Germany and go to the displaced persons camp. So we put us on a train. We went to a place named Puch, the Austrian Alps, waited for the opportunity to go there. Finally they took us into Germany, place called Landshut.

Landshut, yeah.

It was a nice, warm day. We were sitting outside. You dangled your feet and you enjoyed the freedom. And a train goes this way. Another train comes from this way. And then you stop, goes this way and that way. They were trying to find the proper location.

Suddenly, the two trains passed each other. And my father recognized Moishe in the other train. Each other, at the same time, said Moishe! Aron!

And this is your uncle who was in the Soviet Union?

Yeah.

But meantime, we went different directions. But we knew that we are still here in Lanshut. So eventually we got together.

Isn't that interesting. Not in the Soviet Union, but in the DP camp in Germany.

Right.

So now let's go back to Barnaul. The war comes to a close. The war ends.

Yeah. So let me-- I also have to go a short way. The war ended in October. I mean, in May 8, 1945.

Correct.

And the Soviet Union celebrated extra day, because they didn't trust that the Russians-- the Allies, they turn around and attack the Soviet Union. So decided to celebrate the next day. They were waiting to see what happens. Well, nothing happened, as you know. Big celebration at that time in the Soviet Union.

We were marching in the streets, bringing big greetings to Stalin, who was responsible for all the victories and so on. And back to the house, and back to the jobs. Waiting, now, what's happen now? But that was 1945.

We waited and waited till the end of the year. Beginning of the year, just small groups, organized groups were put on trains and allowed to go to Poland. Finally our turn came. People that I knew, I was very close to at the school begged me, stay. Your future is now definitely belongs here. I said no. What about the rest of my family?

Yeah.

Anyway. So we traveled west, went to Moscow, and on and on. And in the train, in the wagon there were Jews and some Poles. And they were singing Polish patriotic songs. Maria Konopnicka is one of them. And we were full of joy and expectation. And we were getting closer and closer to the Polish border.

Suddenly, the train stops and all the Polish people, non-Jews, leaving that particular wagon, go to another one.

As if they had planned this beforehand?

Pardon me?

As if this had been planned beforehand?

Well, what we found out-- the Poles decided that the Poles would congregate in their own wagon and a big cross would be painted on the door. That leaves the others are Jewish. We finally arrived at the border. And they crossed. They stopped on the Polish side. You are in Poland! We were joyed-- overjoyed. Run out.

And there were a lot of people waiting in front. Says, [POLISH]-- Jew. What are you doing here? Go back to the Soviet Union. I said, we just came home. You don't belong here.

So we [INAUDIBLE] back. They start throwing us stones. We had to run for our lives back to the trains.

And you had no warning of something like this.

No. I mean, little did we know that the Poles in the train expected something like that, because that's the reason they separated themselves and put the crosses on the doors. So we [INAUDIBLE] safely inside. They closed the door. Then the train moved on.

How do you explain this?

I give it a lot of thought. But I discovered-- and that's just the first place, first day, a minute that the whole-- or most, most population carried some kind of contamination-- that's the only way I can describe it-- of the unforgiving anti-Semitism. They were very happy that Hitler managed to kill a lot of Jews. And whatever they came across, including me, some survivors they said, oh, he didn't do enough job-- a good enough job. You came this kind of a sentiment all the time.

Did you have any contact with Gentile Poles in the Soviet Union?

Yeah.

And was that sentiment there, too.

Yeah, as I said, we are singing patriotic songs. Oh, yeah. No. Two girls that we were very friendly with, they were Gentile. Yeah. Anyway.

I can't imagine what kind of shock that was.

That was just the beginning.

Let's go on. What happened after that?

They sent us to town, used to be German, Szczecin.

Szczecin. Stettin.

Yeah, Stettin in German, Szczecin in Polish. They gave us the freedom to go to any house. They're all empty. Germans were kicked out.

Who is they? Who is they?

Well, the Polish authorities. And the Russians, too. At that time they were working together. Except there was no food, no place to go. There was no place to [INAUDIBLE] and so on. It was an abandoned town.

I mean, they was told that go to Lodz. That's where the surviving Jews are congregating. Maybe you can organize something and start a life. I start dreaming about maybe I'll go to the University of Warsaw.

I went to Stettin. We decided not to stay there. We went to Lodz. There were some political problems there. And [INAUDIBLE], a lot of things. I don't want to go into details.

Until the day came. Weather was nice. And we decided-- we'd been meaning-- my father and I decided that I will go to Kielce by myself. And at that time it was-- to travel on a train was dangerous for Jews because the Jews were so set against the Jews--

The Poles.

--Poles against the Jews. If they discovered a Jew on a train they threw them out. So finally, we arrived in Kielce.

How far from Kielce is Lodz?

By train, five, six hours.

It's a distance, then. It's a distance.

Yeah. I came across a friend that I knew in Kielce before the war, Lev Silverstein.

Lev Silverstein?

Yes. Silver-- Silverberg. Silverberg.

Silverberg.

And I used to play chess with him. He was a good chess player. And he got to know my mother. And he fell in love with her, naturally. Everyone loved my mother. Tell you that. And so I say, why don't we go together to Kielce? So we went there in the morning, July 4, 1964.

'46.

'46. '46. We arrive in the morning. It's too early. We go to a register. There's a house there on the outskirts.

And what was the purpose of your going back to Kielce?

Well, look, we lived there. My father left the factory. We were in the apartment. My mother lived there until she was taken. See if there is some kind of trace.

Did you know, at that point, what had happened to your mother and brothers?

No.

So maybe they're even alive.

The chances are very small. But was, at that time, not excluded.

So you go to Kielce.

I got to Kielce, arrive in the morning. I walk through the whole street. The town is so small-- smaller than when I remember leaving it. Either I grew or the house got-- the town got smaller.

It shrank.

Something shrank. And I-- OK, enough. Maybe I thought visiting my school, but not enough. Come back to that kibbutz. When I arrived--

You mean there was a kibbutz or there was an organization, a Jewish organization there? What was it?

As it turned out-- which I didn't know at that time-- it was a kibbutz, organized. But when I arrived we were told you have to register. Put your name and so on. But when I arrived it's too early to meet anybody.

He says, go out. Whatever it is, come back later. And that's what I did. We came back. And as soon as you come to the house people started gathered outside and shouting and--

Jewish people?

No, no.

Polish people.

Polish.

And so this house-- was it the headquarters of the kibbutz?

As it turned out. I didn't know at that time. What I do know is, that house had quite a few Jewish families living there on a temporary basis, whatever-- men, women, and children. The idea that I had with Lev is that maybe we'll, first of all, have a bite. We'll register and go on to town and see what we can find. But that was the thought.

Soon people started becoming more violent, started throwing stones at the house, started breaking the windows.

And you're inside the house?

We're inside the house. Policemen came. Two policemen, armed, were outside the door. Said, don't worry. You should feel safe. We would stay there.

But the violence grew stronger and stronger. And they broke all the windows. Suddenly we hear that they broke through the door. They chased out, or whatever they did to the policemen, police let them in.

When they start running in we running out. We went up a pair of stairs-- the flight of stairs. There was the final room for us.

Obviously, temporary headquarters. Metal two-level beds. Under the bed, this way, that way.

They start throwing stones through the windows. We barricaded the door with whatever furniture there was. And after some time there was knocking on the door. Open the door. If you don't open the door we'll throw in a grenade. Everyone became hysterical. That was quite something.

About how many people were in that room?

In that particular room, I don't know, maybe 25, 30.

And the people who were pounding, the-- were they young men? Were they young women? Was it--

Yeah. Who knows.

You didn't see them.

Yeah, but most, I would say, young men. And not so young.

But were there women or girls there in that group?

Probably. I don't know. I didn't have a chance to examine it, look at it, because what happened is they broke through the door, started dragging us out of the room, down the stairs with the arms up in the air. And they go out through the house, and here's the big crowd of people-- [INAUDIBLE] kill the [INAUDIBLE].

I was thinking quickly. Maybe my Polish appearance-- maybe I can do something. And I quickly went down to the ground, start crawling and going among the people, standing up among them, the Polish. I thought, here I am, safe.

Suddenly, my both arms were caught in the back. We saw you going down with your arms up in the air. You are a Jew. So I said, I'm not a Jew. It's hard to argue with it. Yes, you are a Jew. So what if I am a Jew?

The argument didn't last very long, because next thing I know I feel I'm on ground. I feel my eyes getting closed. And it's getting wet with blood. And what I found out after that is they hit me on the side of the head, here, assuming that I'm

among of the killed ones.

An issue of The Times-- which I have it here, by the way-- said 26 Jews were killed. Actually, it was 42. Anyway, so saved me the fact is that I lost my consciousness right away. They thought I am dead.

And somehow, at the end of the day, the Russian army came in. The Polish secret police came in. They arrested a lot of people and sent me to the hospital.

They arrested those who had attacked you.

Who knows, because later on it turned out that they got hold-- I doubt it. I don't believe them. But OK, that was good for the politics at that time.

They found the leaders of the Polish riot. And they were summarily executed, shot. 1946, not much of a law was at that time observed, believe me.

I regained consciousness for just a short time. And I remember the nurse, Polish nurse, says, and you tried to Jew-- you Jew tried to kill a Polish boy! And that was the-- anyway.

And that was the reason for the riot?

The reason for the riot is a made-up story that a Polish boy was missing. The rumor was that he was kidnapped in order to extract blood from him for the matzah, never mind that Passover passed about three months before. But that's the belief.

Did the boy show up?

Eventually they found the boy. He admitted that he was traveling. He had nothing to do with it. There's a whole series of articles about that boy.

But they took me to the hospital. I stayed there a day or two and they sent me to a good hospital-- used to be German-- in Lodz.

And tell me this-- were there other survivors who were in the hospital with you of this particular pogrom? Or were you alone?

No, no. The only survivors. And it's worth adding, when I-- my father was in Lodz, where all this happened. And he knew I went to Kielce. And he was just crestfallen. What happened to my son?

He must have been absolutely terrified.

He didn't know, am I alive or not? What happened? He went through all the list of people who were killed and the names. And there was no Joe Feingold.

Until finally, when I was taken to the second hospital, he was running frantically from survivor to survivor, trying to recognize if one of them is me. And he could not recognize me because I was all wrapped up. And not only was I injured in the skull, but my eyes, everything. I have scratches all over the place.

Were you beaten up, then?

I was beaten up. And so it took some time until something gave him away-- give me away to him and realized that that's me. The funny part is-- not funny. Significant part is this-- Joanna Tokarska, the professor in Warsaw, is very much taken with the whole story. He found out-- she found out that I am now the last survivor of a pogrom. All the others died by now.

Then she took, being a conscious historian, got all the information she can get about me and my family, my father, mother, where we were born. They have all the details. They have all the details from the hospital. I have the details that she sent me of the first one. But she never sent me the second one.

But the details of your being in the first hospital?

Yeah. Yeah. There was a description of my injuries.

Of your injuries. Oh, wow.

She has all this.

Oh, wow.

And she has this-- the book is going to be published in October.

Of 2017.

Yeah. Now. And she said that all that story would be part of the book. So it's not only Joe's Violin that make me famous, but in Poland--

Kielce.

--Kielce I'll be famous by my own rights as a survivor of a pogrom.

I'm almost speechless to ask what happened after that. After your father sees you and you get such a response when you return--

If we have the time I'll tell you. It took me about-- oh, she knows all the details-- month or so to recover in the hospital. I regained my speech, which took some time. They thought my memory would be gone, but it came back, and so on.

And we see it today.

Yeah.

We see it today.

Right. And eventually they send me to a young men's camp not far from Wroclaw.

Wroclaw.

Breslau.

Breslau.

And that's where I recovered and regained my strength. My father came and said, end of Poland. No more Jews in Poland.

In the meantime, there's another story which I cannot take now. But we found out that Alex survived. Alex survived Auschwitz. And he told-- we was told where he is, the displaced persons camp in Germany.

In Germany.



We got in touch with him. He got in touch with us. And we arranged we're going to go to Poland-- to Germany.

And from Germany where did you-- where were you going to go from there?

We arrived in Poland--

Germany.

--in Germany, the DP camp.

Landshut, I think you said.

Pardon me?

Landshut.

No, no. Landshut was a temporary gathering.

Temporary place.

Yeah. But from there they sent us to a place called Zeilsheim.

Ah, Zeilsheim.

Yeah. And that was a settlement-- a nice room for me, houses which were originally occupied by the German workers who worked for the IG Farben.

Ah, IG Farben-- IG Farben.

Yeah. Yeah. All the Germans-- remember, that was under the American occupation. The Americans kicked out the Germans and made room for the newly released people from all the concentration camps and for those who came from Poland.

The displaced. The displaced people.

Yeah, displaced persons.

And then?

So we stayed there until my father, being an alderman, was given priority to visit-- to go-- emigrate to the United States and join his sister. We had sister-- he had a sister that we were in touch with long before the war. And I was also very friendly with that family's children-- Selma, Gloria, Louis. And I start practicing my English a little bit. I start reading, writing in Polish-- in English to them and so on. I'm getting a little bit out of the way.

That's OK. But we are coming close to the end of the story.

Anyway--

When do you come to the United States?

First my father went, being the older, followed by Alex. And I then-- finally, I arrived here in August 18, 1948.

To New York City?

To New York City, on a boat.

What was the name of the boat? Do you remember?

Marine Swallow.

The Marine Swallow.

Yeah. We went to Halifax, Nova Scotia, came to New York. We stayed in New York Harbor. We looked at the Statue of Liberty. And I keep saying that all the time. Sheila knows what impression it made me-- everlasting.

What was it? Tell me.

The Statue of Liberty.

When you first saw it?

Yeah. And I saw-- I mean, look, you arrive and all these things happen. And here it is, a young person-- woman with torch. I mean, to me it's more than just symbolic. It meant so much. [INAUDIBLE]

As I said, we've come close to the end of the interview. I have many questions. But I will suffice to limit it to a very simple one-- did you ever go back to Poland?

No.

Did you ever go back to the Soviet Union?

No. Oh, yeah. Yeah, as a tourist.

As a tourist.

Yeah. There was an organized trip for architects from the United States. So they-- we visited Leningrad, Moscow.

And so on.

And other places.

Did you ever go back to Germany after having lived there?

As a tourist.

As a tourist. But not Poland.

No. No.

Was that conscious? Was that a conscious decision?

I would say primarily, yes. Not pleasant memories.

Yeah.

I read articles about-- the Poles are not the same. And it'll take me god knows how much to be convinced how much they've changed. I don't know. I wish to believe that things are different. And I don't want there.

Are there any final thoughts that you would like to share with us today that we haven't talked about, that you think are important?

Sheila convinced me.

And Sheila is? Tell us on camera who Sheila is.

Sheila is my wife's niece. Sheila's mother is my wife's sister. When I met Regina, which is--

Sheila is-- OK.

--to me, worth a separate story, I acquired a new family, an additional family, I must say. And I'm very, very close with most of them. It's all from Regina's side. And that's Sheila, her sisters, her brothers.

So Sheila just said that it was actually her father and your mother-- and your wife who were brother and sister. Is that correct?

My wife--

Had a brother.

A brother, yeah.

And it was her-- and that's Sheila's father. And Sheila's name? What is her full name? Sheila, last name?

It was Kaufman.

Kaufman.

Sheila Kaufman.

Yeah.

So tell me, what has Sheila convinced you to do? And this was in response to my question.

Sheila left?

No, she's here. She's here. But I want to hear from you when I said, is there anything else you want to add to what we've talked about?

I was thinking, whatever I can add is going to be just a fragment of a memory. Life goes on because things change all the time. Look, who's going to predict that my buying a violin in a DP camp in 1947 will make such a tremendous difference in my life now? Happens all the time. Life doesn't stand still. We have to be aware of it.

Did these things change you as a person inside-- the things you experienced, that you went through?

I'm much more aware of it. I never loved as much as I love now my mother and my father, because I got to know what they were, what they did. They sacrificed. I was too young to really understand that.

Later on, you get so wrapped up in yourself. And then, suddenly, why is it that a young Dominican girl who is, what, now 14 and a half, loves me? I love her. What is it? What do we have in common?

Some people would say that's the miracle. That's the mystery of life.

It's some aspect of humanity. So what I can add is just insignificant to small things that constantly impinge upon me.

Yeah. We have only a minute left. And so I need to wrap up our interview. We have a minute left on tape. And so I will say thank you. Thank you very much.

I'm very happy to be able to share it with you.

Thank you. And this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Joseph Feingold on April 25, 2017.