

OK. This is a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr. Michael, Misha Gazit, on September 2, 2020. And Mr. Gazit I understand you are in San Francisco, California. I am in Falls Church, Virginia. So clear across the United States. Our interview is being recorded by Zoom. And it is conducted in a remote fashion because of the pandemic that we are currently experiencing.

First of all, Mr. Gazit do you agree to this interview, and do you agree to it being recorded?

I agree to the recording and I agree to the interview.

Thank you. Thank you. So I'm going to begin our interview with the most basic questions. And then we'll take everything from there.

So my very first question is this. Can you tell me the date of your birth?

September 28, 1935.

1935.

Yes.

September 28, 1935.

Yes.

In my documents, I have 1934.

Yeah. Again, I don't have the birth certificate. And it was in dispute, since I remember myself, because my mother kept the dates in the Hebrew calendar. And it will never jived together.

I see.

So we came to the conclusion it's actually 1935. And the reason I derived it as 1935-- I had an uncle that served at the time in the Polish army. And he always told me that PiÅsudski at the time died. And after he died, he came to visit my mother because she just gave birth to me.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

And I checked that PiÅsudski actually died in 1935.

This is true.

So I think that's probably the correct date.

OK. And PiÅsudski was one of the interwar leaders of Poland. Probably the strongest interwar leader that Poland had.

Yes. Yes.

OK. What was your name at birth?

It was-- in Hebrew, it's like Micha which is like Misha in Jewish Bornstein.

Bornstein.

Yeah. This was the name of my father. Yes.

And how would I spell it?

Bornstein-- B-O-R-N-S-T-E-I-N. Bornstein.

Where were you born?

Radom, Poland.

Radom in Poland. And can you tell me-- I'm not that familiar with Polish geography. What part of Poland is Radom in? Is it central, is it western?

It's exactly at the center. If you take a straight line between Warsaw and Krakow, Radom is in the middle, between the two cities.

And so when your first name at birth was what? In, let's say-- in Hebrew, it would have been what?

Micha

Misha

Yeah.

And Polish, it would have been?

Probably Mikhail.

OK. OK. And your father's first name?

Eliezer.

Eliezer.

Yes.

And do you know approximately when he was born?

I think I have the document. It was 1905.

So he was a young man when you were born.

Yes.

30 years old or so.

Yes.

And your mother, what was her first name?

Rivka.

Rivka. And her maiden name?

It's Zviebel.

And how would I spell that?

There's a few version. Z-V-I-E-B-E-L. Zviebel.

OK. In German, it means onion.

Yeah, right. Right. We always joked about it, yes.

Oh, really?

Yeah.

What was your first language at home?

Yiddish.

OK. Did you have brothers and sisters?

No.

You were the only child?

Yes.

Were your parents originally from Radom?

My father, yes. My mother, no.

Where did she come from?

She came from eastern Poland, from a little village called Griva, or in Ukraine, it is Hrywa But it was Griva.

Griva.

Yes. All the way in eastern Poland.

How is it that your parents met? How did they marry?

Oh, OK. Since it was such a small Jewish community there, her parents sent her to Radom because in Radom, she had an uncle. And she originally went there. They had, I think, a big summer retreat place, they owned. Like a little hotel or something of this sort.

So she, in the summer, came to help them with the intention that they will let her meet some Jewish boys in Radom. Because Radom was a city. They had about 30,000 Jewish inhabitants. They were about, I would say, 30% of the total population.

So it's a lot.

Yeah. So there was probably a bigger selection than in eastern Poland. So that's where she met him, Eliezer Bornstein. And they got married there in Radom.

Did your mother have brothers and sisters?

Oh, yes.

How many?

She had two brothers and four sisters.

A lot.

A total of seven. Seven siblings.

Did you know any of these aunts and uncles?

Yes. After the war, I met them. But the uncle-- actually, the two uncles, that's part of my survival. We can talk about it later on.

We'll come to that. Yeah. We'll come to that. But right at this point, I wonder if you remember the names of your aunts and uncles on your mother's side.

I think I know all of them. I will start with the oldest one. His name was Isaiah.

Isaiah.

Or in Hebrew, Yesha'yahu Isaiah. Yes.

Yesha'yahu, OK.

Yeah. Then it was Sarah, Sarah. My mother, Rivka, of course.

Rivka.

Yes. There was another one. Ina like Yentl.

How do I spell that? I-N-A? I-N-N-A?

Yes.

Yes.

And then there's the second uncle, Joseph.

Joseph. OK.

Then was another sister. Her name was Pesia I don't how you can translate it in--

I know the name. I know the name.

Pesia

[INAUDIBLE]

Yes. I think that's all what I remember.

There's one more. But that's OK. That's OK. You remembered six of them.

Yeah.

OK. And your father, did he have brothers and sisters?

Yes. He had a brother and a sister.

Did you know your aunt and uncle from your father's side?

No. I don't remember them. Of course, I left very early and never saw them again.

OK. Do you know their names?

The brother was Israel. Israel.

Israel. OK.

Yes. And the name of his sister, I'm not sure.

OK.

I think her name was Havva, Eva.

Havva.

Havva, yes.

Did your parents come from about the same equal social class, or was it different?

It's a little hard to compare. Because my mother comes from a family which are mainly merchants, and from my father's side, they were actually manufacturing. They had a leather manufacturing company, kind of.

My father and his brother were partners in leather kind of, I don't know what's the right term in English. Like leather--preparing the leather for production of shoes or coats, [INAUDIBLE] for this kind of stuff.

It sounds like a tannery.

Yeah. Exactly. Exactly.

OK.

So they were both partners in this production.

And was this a company that they founded themselves, or had they inherited it from their father?

I think they founded it.

OK.

Because their father, which means my grandfather, was basically a teacher in the gymnasium there.

OK.

Had the --

Had your father's family lived in Radom for generations? Or had they moved there from somewhere else, do you think?

I think they lived for quite a long time. I would say for generations, yes.

Did you know your grandparents on your father's side?

I don't remember them. They probably saw me. But I left Radom when I was three years old.

OK. We'll talk about this. We will talk about this.

Yeah.

Did the two families ever meet? That is, your mother's side of the family, with your father's side of the family?

Yes, they did, I think, during the wedding. But it was too far away to have constant meetings or--

Visits.

[INAUDIBLE] yes.

OK. And would you say that the company that your father had with his brother-- his brother was Isaiah, yes? Yesha'yahu.

No. His brother was Israel. His name was Israel.

Israel. Excuse me. Excuse me. Israel. Was it something that was very large, or was it a small company?

I have no idea.

OK.

That's no-- it's only what I was told. Yes.

OK. All right. Did you know your father?

I don't remember him.

OK. All right. Do you know anything else about his side of the family? Do you know anything more about who they were, where they came from, and so on?

Very little. No. No.

Only that his father was a teacher in the gymnasium, the high school?

Yes.

OK. And was Radom part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before World War 1? Or was it part of Prussia, or part of Russia? Do you know?

Good question. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. Never investigated this aspect of Poland.

Well, the reason why I ask is because many times, if somebody was in, let's say, the Austro-Hungarian side, they would have fought. The fathers would be of such an age that they either experienced, or would have fought during World War

1, with the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

But your father is born 1905. So he would have been too young.

Yeah, to fight in the First World War, yes.

Yeah. OK. So you are an only child.

Yes.

Do you know anything about your home in Radom? Where you lived.

Only what my mother told me. It was like a two-story building. It was already electricity and running water. At the time, it was not common in Poland.

No.

But it was quite modern. We lived on the second floor, she told me. Because many times, she had problems with the stairs. And I would be trying to run and had a few accidents.

Yeah, so. But in the lower floor, I think, the grandfather lived with his wife.

OK. So your father's parents.

Yeah.

OK. So it was their home. Either the grandparents home, or the--

Yeah. The whole building, I would say. The whole building belonged to the Bornstein family, I would say.

OK. And do you have any memories of this place at all?

Not at all, no.

Not at all. All right. So how is it that you don't know your father, or your grandparents, or that you have no memory of Radom? What happened that created this situation?

Yeah. OK. Every summer, my mother would take me back to where she was raised and born, to eastern Poland to see my grandfather, in this place that I told you, Griva.

Griva.

Yeah. And it's a wonderful place during the summer. Because it's a place-- like I told you, it's near Polesia, which is known to be at the Amazon of Poland. I mean, forests and rivers. So this was a wonderful place to spend the summer. So every summer she would take--

Was it large? Was it a large village, or was it a town, Griva?

The village was smaller. They had maybe like 200 families there. But around it you have bigger towns.

OK. And the village itself was named Griva? Or was it--

Griva. Griva.

Griva. And did it have a large Jewish population?

No. They were the only family in this village. Yes. But around it, about five kilometers away, there were other small towns that had a bigger Jewish population.

So they always communicated. And it was almost an hour walk by foot, or with a horse, 20 minutes or something like this.

Did anybody have a car?

No, no. This part of Poland was very, very backward. No electricity and no running water.

What kind of a place did your mother take you to then? Her father's home, was that it?

Yes.

And what did that look like?

Her father's home. Well, this was a big ranch that they bought from a Polish nobleman.

Oh, wow. OK.

And it was a very big-- as far as I remember very well. It has maybe like 10 rooms. I don't remember. And adjacent to the house they had a shop. Like a big-- almost like a little supermarket there. And behind that, the fields that belonged to this Polish nobleman.

The land, we could not buy. Because at the time, Jews not allowed to own land in Poland.

But you were allowed to own the house.

Yes. Yes.

How strange.

And the house, they purchased many, many years ago. It was in 1830 according to the stories I was told. So it belongs to the family since 1830.

That's unusual.

Yeah. Yeah, it is.

Well, it sounds like it was an estate of some kind.

Like an estate. With the exception of the land around it. It has many hundreds of acres. But it still belonged to the nobleman, and his family, of course.

And the crops from this land was always collected and paid for. bit by bit paid whatever it was worth back to the nobleman.

Every year?

Every year, yes.

Well, it sounds, also then-- it gives me the assumption that whichever ancestor bought it in 1830 must have been well-

off in order to buy the estate from a nobleman.

It's possible.

Must have had some kind of-- yeah.

It's possible. I always thought that the grand-grandfather, back like three or four generations, he was a very big traveler and had business all over. And he was also a big art collector. But of course, I never saw it. I never experienced it. But I guess that there was some [INAUDIBLE] that he was quite capable, at least financially, was capable of purchasing such a thing.

And your own grandfather-- your mother's father? You say he was a merchant?

Yeah. He was a merchant there.

Did he use that little store to sell things, or did he have a store somewhere else?

No. He sold-- actually, he was the only store in all the region. So all the farmers and everybody would come and buy all the necessities from him. He was the only one there.

And in return, he also bought from the farmers and from all the-- there were a lot of hunters there that would hunt foxes and all kinds of stuff, that would bring the fur. And they would take them and ship them to some other places.

So it was like a,

a very involved business here.

Yeah. It sounds very lucrative.

Yeah, they were very--

If you're the only one there.

Yeah. They were very well-to-do, yeah. Very well-to-do.

So he was more well-to-do than your father's side of the family?

It's hard to compare. It's hard to compare.

I know. You said that in the beginning. But you know--

Maybe even more. It's possible. Because they were able to marry six daughters. And at that time-- five daughters, yeah. At the time, some money had to come with it, you know.

Yeah. That's a complication. To be able to do that, yes. And each one has a dowry.

Exactly. Exactly.

Did your father ever visit with your mother in the summertime?

I don't recall. Maybe. Maybe when I was younger, because the last time we visited was 1939. And we can go later on what happened in '39.

Oh. So when you were three years old--

Three or four years old.

You were four years old in the summer of 1939.

Yes. We left Radom for the summer like in June or something like this. And this was the last time we left Radom.

And so your mother and your father never saw each other again either.

No. No.

OK. OK.

We can go later what happened at that time.

Well, of course, September 1, 1939. Germany attacks Poland.

Yes.

And how did that--

It was a couple of weeks later, the Russians, take over eastern Poland.

That, I think, was September 17. That they take over.

OK. You have the exact date. I see. Yeah.

This is what I remember from other interviews that I've done is that people would talk about that.

Yeah, I see. Yeah. Yeah.

Do you have any memories of this time? I mean, you're four years old. And if someone would ask me what do I remember from four years old, I don't know if I could answer. But do you?

Vaguely, I can remember. I remember the blackout. We had to cover all the windows during the night, because planes were flying over. This I remember very well. Some kind of mystery.

And the next thing, I remember my mother was crying that she cannot go back home, and what's going to happen to my father. I remember. She was very, very upset. I mean, it's the most dramatic stuff I still remember.

OK. Did the estate have a telephone?

There was a telephone. But it did not operate. It was a connection to the main-- like, the capital of the area, or the region. It was called Commune kushirsk This was the main municipal area.

So there was a telephone right there. I guess where the graf lived there.

The count, yeah.

Yeah. But it was never in operation. As far as I remember.

And you said--

[INAUDIBLE] I tried-- these are some of the memories. I tried to play with it. And nobody even bothered to tell me

don't do it, because it was dead.

Yeah. You say the estate didn't have electricity?

No.

OK. Did it have running water, indoor plumbing?

No. They had a well in the back of the house.

What did the house look like?

It was a one-story house. Like I said, about 10 rooms. Very long. From wood. Made of wood. Except the kitchen. I remember the kitchen had some bricks inside. But the rest of it was--

The picture I get in my mind when I think of estates that belonged to Polish nobility-- I always think of stone buildings two stories high, that looked like almost little castles. But this is different.

This is different.

And there are certain-- yeah. OK.

Yeah.

Do you know--

I guess down there, the main building material was wood, of course.

Yeah.

And it's around such forests. So this was probably the main building material. Yeah.

But I remember a lot of glass. I remember one of the back rooms, the last room, was like a solarium. There was a lot of glass. I remember. And inside, they had all kinds of plants in the house. This I vaguely remember.

OK. And-- oh. I just had a question and it-- do you remember the name of the Polish family-- the nobility, the nobleman who sold-- whose land was still belonged to?

No. Not at all, no.

OK.

Maybe I can research it, but no, I don't. I don't recall even hearing the name or whatever. No.

OK. And did your grandfather live alone in this big house? Or when you would visit him with your mother, who else lived there?

His youngest son, which is my uncle. Uncle Joseph. He lived there and helped him with the business. Actually, he took over the business.

OK.

Uncle Joseph.

Uncle Joseph.

Yes.

And the other children, did they live nearby?

No. Some of them immigrated to Brazil, to Argentina.

Oh?

And to nearby cities like Manyevich. That's the city about--

How far is Manyevich?

It's about 30 kilometers west of Griva.

OK.

It was also like a summer retreat place. People would come from the big cities and stay there. Because it was surrounded by forests and lakes.

It sounds like it was a beautiful part of the country.

Oh, yes. It was--

If you talk-- the people go at the summertime.

Yeah. I would say it's the most undeveloped. I mean, anyone who looked for nature, this was a nice place. The most undeveloped spot of Poland was in this area, I would say so.

In the eastern part. Yeah.

Yeah.

Do you remember much from Griva itself? You say there were about 200 people living there, or 200 families?

200 families.

200 families. So that might even get us up to close to 1,000 people if it's 200 families?

Probably even more. It's maybe more, because at the time, each family had my, something in average 7 or 8 children.

That's right.

So it could be quite a lot.

And do you know how it came to be that your mother's family was the only Jewish family there? How they came to settle in Griva?

I always wondered about it. And they did not have really a convincing story to tell me. I guess this was just the business that was available. Because I guess the Polish nobleman had developed his business. And they just took over and continued with it.

OK. OK. And-- oh. I just had another question that was on the tip of my tongue. Your uncle lived there. He took over

the business. It was the play --

Ah. I know what I was going to ask. Were most of the other people in Griva Polish? Or were there also Ukrainians there?

I would say most of them were Ukrainian. Yeah. Belonging to the pravoslavac part of Christianity.

The Orthodox. Yeah.

Yeah. Orthodox. There were quite a few Baptists.

Interesting.

Yeah. And a few Polish Catholics. But they didn't have a church there. But we knew them.

So the Poles were in a minority.

Yes. Definitely.

OK. And did the Ukrainian Orthodox, did they have a church?

Yes. Quite a nice church, yeah.

And was it the--

With the famous onion on the top here.

Were you ever inside?

Not inside, but from outside, I could see it.

Was there a synagogue anywhere close by?

Yeah. About five kilometers away, in a little town called [PLACE NAME]

[PLACE NAME]

Yeah. Down there was quite a big Jewish community. So let's say, the holy days-- the High Holy Days, and some other occasions, they would go there and stay there. They had also family there. So this was--

You mean, your family had family there?

Yes.

OK. Would have that been one of your mother's brothers or sisters?

No. Most of them were cousins, I think. Most of them were cousins.

Was your family religious?

Yes, very much so.

So your grandfather and your mother, they observed all of the rituals?

Oh, yes. All the holy days, and all the rituals. Yes.

OK.

Yeah. At the time, most of the Jews were religious, probably, yeah, at that time.

But you see, here's an interesting distinction. Some people became more secular, particularly if they lived in the larger cities.

Exactly.

They were more often secular. And like, your father's family, as far as much as you know, were they as religious as your mother's?

No. Much less. Much less.

And how do you know that? Did your mother tell you?

Yes. They were not as observant as they were.

OK. And-- forgive me, but this is one of those questions where-- the dress, that how your grandfather dressed and your mother-- was that in a secular way, or was that something that was in keeping with some of the older traditions?

No, this was more secular, I would say.

OK.

It just was just the same like the Ukrainian housewives around there-- the same.

OK. OK. Do you have any other memories, early memories, of being on the estate, of living there before the war happens, or even immediately afterwards?

Afterwards I remember more before that.

Tell me about that.

Well, we stayed there since 1939 the minute we were separated from Poland. So we could not go back. So we stayed there at my grandfather's house.

So we were two years under the Soviet regime at the time.

Do you have any memory of that? Did that affect your grandfather at all?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. They kind of tried to confiscate the business and make it a cooperative. But that's another story I can tell how they avoided it.

Please. Please.

OK. Living so close to their gentile neighbors, they developed quite a good friendship and good relations. Very good.

Of course, there were many of them at the time that did not like Jews. They were anti-Semites, especially the Ukrainians. But there were many of them very, very friendly, especially the Baptists.

They would always call my grandfather the Abraham from the Bible. Because they believed in the Bible. So and he had

the long beard. So they called him Abraham. Even his name was Shlomo.

OK.

Yeah. [INAUDIBLE; BOTH TALKING]].

And were these Baptists Ukrainians or were they Poles?

The Baptists were Ukrainians.

They were Ukrainians. OK.

And from all their friends, there was one family. He was quite poor. And they supported him. My grandfather and my uncle Joseph from time to time gave him food and some other stuff. They were very poor.

And he was so close to my uncle Joseph that-- who could tell him all kinds of stuff that he even did not want to hear about it. One of the things that he belonged to a communist underground in Griva.

This poor man. From the poor family.

This poor man.

Yeah.

Yeah. And his name is very important. He was named Nikolai Konishtook.

Konishtook

Konishtook. And later one, during the war, he was called Crook.

Not crook like we understand.

No, no. No. Not at all. No. Just the short of Konishtook was Crook.

OK.

And this poor little guy became kind of dependent on Uncle Joseph, to give him from time to time some handouts. And one of the days, he came to Uncle Joseph. And he said-- Uncle Joseph also was dealing with scrap metal. He would-- the farmers around would [till their fields. And from time to time they would find an old cannon, or rifles, or whatever. So they would bring it to him. And he would collect them and sell it as scrap metal by the pound.

And so he came one day, this Crook, or Nikolai. And he saw a big pile of old rifles, rotten, corroded. And he wanted a rifle. Just the corroded. So Joseph asked him, what for? Why do you need it?

And anyway, he was not allowed to give it away. But anyway, he was pleading. So I gave him, and he told him, you never know. One day you may need it. So again--

Crook said that, or uncle Joseph said that?

No, Crook said it. You never know. One day you may need it. And he was looking through the pile, also found, that, in addition to the rifle, the lock inside so you can't combine the two of them and you can make it a shooting instrument.

OK.

So he gave it to him and forgot about it. But this would be important later on.

OK.

So we also had, at the home, they had a maid. A very nice, almost like a family member. She cooked and then helped them. And also in the bed, they had chickens and cow and horses. So she took care of everything. And Also her husband of this maid helped with all the chores of the house.

Do you know her name? Do you remember--

Yes. Darka

Darka.

Yeah. Yeah. Well, also an important name in my history.

OK.

Her name was Darka. And she was like a family member.

So when the Russians arrived, when the Soviets arrived, was that good news for Mr. Crook?

That's it. So since he was such a good buddy to my Uncle Joseph, the communists wanted to confiscate the shop and make it a cooperative. So he arranged it that it was called a cooperative, but nothing happened.

Actually, nothing happened. Except by name. So he arranged it that my uncle Joseph continued with the business as usual.

And did your uncle, do you know-- did anything happen with supplies? I mean, did the amount of goods that he was selling-- did that change?

Very much so. Very much so. Everything now, he had to go to the big city and get like a special quota. He had to bring so many names that depend on him. And abide by this number of names. He could get like 100 kilos of sugar, or 200 kilos of flour, or whatever.

It was already not what it used to be. He had to go through a certain procedure to get supplies. And many things were not available anymore. So it was quite a big change. But at least his business, still stayed intact.

And did anybody-- did any of the-- excuse me, please. Did any of the new Soviet authorities visit the estate, as far as you know? Did any soldiers show up? Any commissar?

No, That's when everything ran through this Crook because he was already in the underground-- the communist underground. So the minute the communists came, he was immediately the manager of the village. He already established there--

And did the villagers-- OK.

Yeah. And they established, like before, a governing board of the village. And he took Joseph to be part of the board. One of the members.

I see.

And he was the head of the board.

OK. Now do you know-- I mean, again, I realize that you're only four years old at this point.

Yes.

And some of the questions that I have are questions that are normal for an adult. But did you ever learn later-- did anyone ever tell you how the other people in the village perceived this takeover by the Soviets? Was it something they were in favor of, or was this something they didn't like?

They did not like. And they developed quite an animosity to this Crook. They started to hate him very much. They did not know that he was an underground hiding communists, and suddenly came open.

And many of the farmers, they lost their land. It became like a kolkhoz So they hated the Russians. [INAUDIBLE].

There was a collective farm?

Yes. At least in name. They started to change it. Of course, it didn't happen in one day, because there was a lot of resistance to this policy. But as far as I know, they started to hate him very much so.

Did their attitude change to your family?

Probably not. Because there was anti-Semitic feelings before and even after. But we felt a little better when the Soviets came. Because they came like, there's no religion. There's no discrimination on the religious base. So in this respect, maybe it was a little less obvious than before.

OK. Had the anti-Semitism been strong before in the village?

Oh, yeah. There were quite a few elements which were very hostile. Especially the Ukrainian nationalists. Some of them were called by the name of past fighters, like Bulbovtists on the name of Bulba.

Bulba.

[INAUDIBLE] yeah. So their name was Bulbovtists. And a another one were the [INAUDIBLE] Like the Green Party. The [INAUDIBLE].

[INAUDIBLE] OK.

Yeah. They were very Ukrainian nationalists, and also extremely anti-Semitic. And I can tell you one unpleasant accident we had.

The minute the war broke out, there were like a few weeks there was no-- nobody knew what's going to happen in this area of Poland. So one night, we were attacked in our home by these Ukrainian bandits.

It was [INAUDIBLE] at night. I remember it like today. My Uncle Joseph was resting from the day work in another bedroom. And it was maybe like 8 o'clock in the evening.

Suddenly, we heard a window glass breaking. And then a shot from a pistol, a gunshot. And then three masked people came in from the bedroom with my uncle Joseph.

He was a little injured. I mean, when they were shooting, the bullet just scraped his forehead. So he was bleeding a little here. And he came-- I remember, we were still sitting in the dining room. And this was a terrible experience.

So they came in, masked, all of them. Three of them took all of us, put us on the floor in the kitchen, and covered us with all kinds of blankets or whatever. And they were roaming around the house, taking everything.

And then they came to my mother. She had a diamond ring. By force, they removed it from her finger. And again told her lie down, and covered everybody. It took probably the whole night, they were taking stuff. And then they disappeared. At least we were happy they did not kill us. So this was one of the most, I would say, signs of the love we got there from certain elements.

And was this during-- is this after the war begins, or is this before the war begins?

The between when the -- Germany declared war and the war started. And until the Russians came. They were --

During those two weeks?

Yeah. Two or whatever. But for us it was forever. It was like no authority. There was complete chaos. So they used it to do all kinds of things.

OK.

So this is one example of the extreme hatred that existed between certain elements.

So when the Soviet troops came in, at least it was the re-establishment of some kind of authority?

Oh, yes.

OK.

In this respect, it was kind of more assuring. And at least for us, as a Jewish family, it was OK.

Did you know, or did anyone tell you later, of any kind of NKVD presence and activity in Griva?

Yeah. I think my uncle always mentioned to be quiet, not to talk too much. Because NKVD-- NKVD, yeah, it's exactly the name. You never know who is going to be one of them. And not to talk too much. [INAUDIBLE].

Well, tell me-- there will be people who will be listening to this interview in the future. And they won't know what NKVD is. Can you explain?

NKVD, this is like the secret police of the communist regime, yes. Of the Soviet Union.

So the equivalent of the Gestapo.

Yeah. You may say so, yes. Yes.

OK.

And they were very feared. If somebody at night would knock on the door, it was NKVD, it was quite a bad experience. Unpleasant.

Was your uncle Joseph married?

He married. But I guess after a year or so, it was annulled.

OK. So did he have children at all or no?

At that time, no. At that time, no. Later on, yes. He was still young.

And in our description up until now, I don't hear much about any of your mother's other brothers or sisters.

OK. So, like, one of them went to Brazil. The other one went to Argentina. Pesia lived, I think, in Manyevich.

OK. Not so far.

Not so far. And his brother, or my uncle Isaiah, Yesha'yahu, lived also in Manyevich.

OK.

And he had a family there. He was married and he had two daughters. And he also was part of the business from the village. Because my uncle or my grandfather, they would collect all these furs from foxes and other stuff. And they would send it to him. And he would send it farther away. So it was kind of an exchange business there.

Well, actually, there's a connection, when you think of some of these things, that it probably didn't happen. But they could have sent it to your father in Radom, when he had a tannery. If they needed to make cowhide, they could make leather from.

Exactly.

Things like that.

Exactly. Yeah. But it's not developing; there was no time.

There was no time.

Yeah. So his brother Isaiah, Yesha'yahu. He had a very nice home in this Manyevich. There was quite a big Jewish community there.

And what is interesting-- he married also a very well-to-do-- his wife was Sarah. Her name was Sarah. And when they built their house, when they were still young, a Belgian agricultural expert came there and settled down to live there and teach the Ukrainian farmers how to grow flowers and other stuff.

So they rented their house. And for a few years, they lived somewhere else, with their parents, I guess. When they were still young.

So this Belgian guy developed such a beautiful garden in the backyard. So everybody, from all the neighborhoods, from all the cities, would come to see it. It was so beautiful. All kinds of flowers. They'd never saw them in the Ukraine.

And when he left and they moved to the house, it was unbelievable how beautiful it was. So they have now the cities with the most beautiful house in eastern Ukraine. It was so nice.

No kidding.

Yeah. It was so nice.

It was in Manyevich.

Yeah, in Manyevich, yeah. But a beautiful and special array of flowers, I guess. And he had some solarium he developed all kinds of stuff. He brought civilization to this place, I guess. Yeah.

And the house itself was so big. They had two kitchens-- the kitchen for the summer, and the kitchen for the winter. And many, many rooms.

So it sounds like he was well-to-do as well.

Very, very well-to-do, yes.

And all from the same business?

Yeah. I would say the same. Like a branch of what they were doing in Griva, he was doing in Manyevich here.

And also a lot of wood products. Because near the forest, there were many places where they were cutting wood and were doing all kinds of furniture and other stuff. So there was a lot of raw materials that they could handle.

In this time, was there any news from your father and what was going on in Radom?

Only one time came a little letter. This was, I guess, a few months after the war started. There were still some smugglers that went between the borders. So he told my mother to stay, not to try to come back. Stay where she is. And they are managing fine. And let's hope for the best.

And that's the last time we heard from him. Oh yeah. And also he sent with this farmer or whatever it was, a pair of boots for me, because the winter was coming. So he sent special boots, what's called, at that time, it's called valenkis.

Valenkis. Are these felt? Made out of felt?

Yeah. Right, right. So they are very warm for the winter. So that's the last time we heard from him.

Do you ever know what happened to him?

Later on, yeah. All of them, at least the men, were used in some factories around Radom. And I think in 1944, all of them were executed. Before the Russians came.

So did you ever find any documentation about your father during those years?

We have only a registration card from the German authorities. And that's all that we have.

Wow. OK. So he disappeared from your lives?

Yeah. Completely. Completely.

No photograph of him?

Just a photograph that my mother sent to her sisters in Brazil and Argentina. They kept it. But with us, we had nothing. Everything was lost, was destroyed.

That happened with many people. That they lost all of such things. And only from relatives abroad who might have gotten such a photograph, they were able to find it.

Yes.

When was the first time that you looked upon a picture of your father? Do you know how old you were?

Oh, probably I was like maybe seven when they came here, maybe 15 or something like this.

Did you have any reaction to it?

He looked like a stranger to me I mean. There was no reaction at all. Like, it could have been any other picture. I mean, because in my mind, I didn't have anything to relate or to connect to. At least, not mentally.

Did you miss having a father?

Definitely. Growing up without a father, of course. It's always missing in your life.

Did anybody step in sometimes, and at some point-- doesn't take on the role of the father, but is there for you in that way? Was there anybody like that?

I was in this respect very lucky. My grandfather, as long as he was alive, was very, very supportive and very, very loving. And also Joseph. Uncle Joseph, he was almost in the action of a father, almost. He took care of me, yeah.

As you were speaking of him, I had that impression that he was someone who was important in these early years of your life.

And later, I will tell you. He actually saved us with his connection and his situation at that time. He was able to save us.

Tell me a little bit about the personalities of your grandfather, uncle Joseph, and your mother. What kind of personalities did they have as individuals?

My mother was very gentle. Very, very quiet. I would say very easily insulted. If you tell something, she would feel [INAUDIBLE] very sensitive. Very sensitive. And very quiet, but very loving.

And also loving towards the family. Very dedicated to the family. Was a great, great mother, of course. A great cook. She liked to cook for the family.

My grandfather, as far as I remember him, he was very, very quiet, maybe, because of the-- first of all, he was not a young man anymore. And everything that was happening, he was kind of under shock, I would say. He was shocked what happened all around him. So I remember, he did not speak much.

Was your grandmother alive?

No. She died at a younger age. After she gave birth to one of the sisters of my mother, she died a year later. I guess.

Did your grandfather ever remarry?

No. And Joseph, he was the big hero in my life. He was connected to all the villagers. He had all the dealing and wheeling. And he knew how all the types are. He was a good reader of their character, I would say. He had a high mental intelligence, I would say.

So these days, we call it emotional intelligence.

Exactly. Emotional intelligence. He could read many types of these only in the village, whom he can trust, and whom he can be careful and not come too close to him. He was very, very successful, I guess, in this respect.

During this time, when there is that Soviet occupation of eastern Poland, was there any Polish presence that you sensed? I mean, you say that most of the Ukrainians did not like them. But was there any Polish kind of attitude, or feeling, or response?

I don't recall anything that remains in my memory that I can distinguish.

And today, is Griva part of Poland, or is it part of western Ukraine?

Western Ukraine.

OK. I mean, from what my understanding is, that these territories in eastern Poland were a great deal of contention between the Ukrainians and the Poles.

Yes.

That there was a great deal of animosity between the two.

Oh, yes.

And quite a bit of violence, each, actually.

Oh, yes. Yes.

Did you know of any of this at the time in Griva? Did you experience any of it? Did it come out?

At that time, when the Russians took over, during the war, I, from stories that my uncle told me, it was a big animosity towards the Russians and, of course, the communists again, because they tried to convert it to a cooperative or kolkhoz. And they didn't like it. So there was quite an animosity between the Ukrainians and the Russians.

But at that time, they could not express it. Because they were afraid to do anything.

But between the Poles and the Ukrainians, you don't remember? Or it did not play a role?

Not really. But what I can remember-- and then the Germans came and took over. Some of the Polish farmers or people there were more kind of exertive and they kind of came closer to the Germans and became managers of the village.

I don't know how it happened. But some of them became trusted by the Germans more than the Ukrainians. I don't know why.

Interesting. Because usually, at least the stereotype is the opposite.

Yeah.

Because most Poles were not treated very well by the Germans.

Exactly. But in this village, maybe because of their personality, I know at least one of them that became-- one was the head of the village. He was a Polish. And he also was very mean to our family. So this is what I remember.

His name was Krakoviak.

Kakovia?

Krakoviak.

Krakoviak.

Did most people know one another in Griva? Did you know each other by first name?

Yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, most of them, yes.

OK. And since you come from Radom, and you come when you're so small that you have no memories of Radom, did you end up knowing everybody in Griva? And they know you?

No. Some of the neighbors knew me. You know with this kind of loving attitude to a small child. And I remember later

on, like in '41, '42, and already the Germans were there. I played with the neighbor's children. And during the winter, we would build ourselves little sleds. And we played. So we were quite normal relations between children.

Even after the Germans arrived?

Yes. Yes.

Wow.

Because what happened in the beginning, the village is so remote from the main roads. So the Germans did not even bother to come there for the first year or so.

Really?

Yes.

So for one year, it is more or less left alone?

Almost alone. But of course, they nominated one of the [INAUDIBLE] like I told you, the Krakoviak to be the head of the village.

Now, while the Soviets were still there, did you start school?

I was supposed to start next year. Because at that time, I think, you start school at seven or something that is of course, not at six. I'm not sure what year.

But I remember even getting books. I had to go to a special place that they distributed books. I remember to this day, I got some Russian books, but never had a chance to study.

Yeah. So was there talk amongst the grown ups of what is going on in the rest of Poland? Was their talk about what Germany is doing? Was there surprise that the Russians had come? Was there any kind of discussion either in the family or in the village of 1939 and how the war started, and what's happening now? Excuse me. Was there any kind of discussion like this?

I don't remember anything more specific, with the exception to this guy Crook that suddenly became a big shot. Because the Russians came. And by chance that he was such a good friend, or actually a dependent on Joseph.

Yeah.

So in this respect, it was OK. It was a good development for them. At least from the security point of view.

But that's talking about what happens within the village. I'm saying, was there any news, or I'm asking, was there any news about what's going on in greater Poland? Was there any kind of information? Was there any interest? Or was it really an isolated village where the outside world didn't matter much?

Most of it, I would say, are just rumors and nothing official, or nothing more logical. It's all kinds of rumors who came from nowhere. So I don't really remember the details. But every time was some kind of a panic. This happened, or this happened.

But I cannot make up any cohesive or coherent story, how they felt. At least not what I observed. [INAUDIBLE].

Well, of course, I know I'm asking you. You were a child, yeah.

Yeah.

Do you remember the German attack on the Soviet Union? Do you remember Operation Barbarossa?

Yes. Oh, yes. First of all, up until that day, there had been in the center of the village, they had a radio with a big speaker. So we heard almost every day the communist propaganda. And sometimes Stalin would speak. And you heard it all the time.

Suddenly, the whole thing changed. And from the same speaker, you could hear Hitler, with his terrible voice. So up until this day, I can still hear his terrible-- you know, screams in the radio.

So this is at least in my head, it's what I remember, the big change in the atmosphere, in the air.

Well, that's interesting. Because most of the time what happens is, people see soldiers, people see boots, people see armor. And what you is, it's what you hear through the same speaker.

Yeah, right.

Because this was the only, I would say, thing that connected this village to the outside. They didn't have any newspapers there. There were no trains coming there-- nothing. So this was the only way of kind of feeling what happens outside the village.

And so there was no German soldier in the village.

No. Not in the beginning.

OK. And what happened to Mr. Crook? He must have disappeared very fast.

Oh, what happened to him. The minute the Germans attacked, of course, he was shocked like the whole Soviet army was. So he saw-- so first of all, he ran towards the main town, which was the municipal center of the area, which is [PLACE NAME].

So he came there to ask what happens, what to do. He saw the Russian army in retreat, in disarray, panic. So he joined one of the columns and the Russian army and went deep into Russia. We even did not know what happened to him. And he disappeared with the Russian army.

And back in the village, he had brought your uncle Joseph onto that council, as well as some other people. Did your uncle Joseph suffer any repercussions because he had been on this council?

Not immediately. But later on, of course-- he was immediately-- not immediately-- after the Germans established a certain structure, he was ordered by this Krakoviak he became the head of the village. He told him that as a Jew, he has to go to [PLACE NAME] and register and see what to do next.

So my uncle was suspicious, but he didn't have a choice. Because from other rumors, many Jews that were sent there never came back. They were executed somewhere during their stay there.

So he came there. And the Germans asked him what he's doing. He told them-- he already prepared a certain story, that he's working for the forestry authority. And he can manage-- for managing the cutting of trees and providing trees for the civil use. So that's something that they needed very, very badly. The German army needed wood for the war effort.

So they gave him a special permit that he can stay, go back to his place, and continue to work and provide wood to the German army. And they gave him a special document that for the time being, he can stay there. So this was kind of a temporary relief.

Now did Mr. Krakoviak send him there because he was implementing an anti-Jewish policy? Or did he send him there

because uncle Joseph had been part of this council?

I would say because of the anti-Jewish policy. Yes. This was an order to all the municipalities to identify the Jewish people and send them there, especially the male people.

The men.

Yeah, the men.

Your grandfather-- do you know how old he was about this time?

I think he was around 70. At that time, I guess it was old age. Yeah. He had a long beard and a white beard. So he looked old.

But you know, when you said earlier that he looked shocked by all of these changes, you know, I tried to put yourself in the place of a person who spent his entire life in this place. Is someone who establishes a business. And there had been-- I mean, this was never a very stable part of the world.

And yet he was able to thrive in this stable part of the world. And all of a sudden, things happen that are beyond his experience.

Yes.

Beyond anything that he had ever seen or experienced before. Yeah. Did his manner change? Did he all of a sudden become even older in his way of being?

I would say so. He became much more internalized. Everything, he did not open up. Everything was in him. He could not express himself the way he did before. It was always kind of enclosed in his own shed.

And your mother, how did she react to these types of changes?

Well, she was very, very, of course, worried. And every little thing would scare her. Every little noise. So somebody would knock on the door, she would get immediately startled or something. She was always on the edge, like, who knows what's going to happen not only tomorrow, or five minutes from now.

And you know, when you're such a young child, these types of ways the grown ups behave has an enormous effect on a child. We pick these things up very quickly.

Oh, yes.

You know?

Yeah. I would say so, yes. But--

Were you frightened?

Yeah. I was. Of course. Especially after this experience during the robbery during the night. Every time somebody would knock, the minute it was a little dark, I was always afraid.

So your uncle Joseph comes back. And he has this permit for a while to keep on cutting down the forest, providing wood.

Yes.

And how does life progress?

Trying to remember. Well, again, living in fear. From time to time, we heard that all kinds of bandits, most of them Ukrainian nationalists, are going to Jewish homes, robbing and also killing.

And this happened in the bigger places. So there were a few times that our good neighbors, they were telling us that a big gang is coming. This happened a few times. They saw them coming with horses and with big-- even with musical instruments, playing Ukrainian nationalist songs.

And a few times, they told us, you'd better disappear. So many times we left our house and spent all the day in the fields, hiding. At the time it was like harvest time, I remember. So they still had big wheat--

Wheat stalks.

[INAUDIBLE]. Yeah. So we could go inside and hide there for the day. So many times, we just didn't want to stay at home at all.

And when you would return home, would you see a change? Was there a difference? Had they ransacked the place?

No. They were just looking for us. There was already nothing there to rob. It was already empty. So they would knock and look around and scream, and do all kinds of stuff and continue.

And what was happening--

And this happened quite a few times.

Yeah. What was happening in Manyevich with your relatives there, and with the other people? While you're in this more isolated place, what's happening in a place where there are more Jews?

Yeah. So what happened there, after a few months after the Germans arrived, they ordered all the males, all the men, again to report to the train station there, all of them.

And from then, there were marched to a certain place. And all of them were executed. They were shot. But nobody knew. The news was that they were taken to some urgent work. And some fake kind of like fake people that came back and told, they are doing fine. They are working hard. They will come soon.

So anyone that escaped this, some of them were suspicious of it. They were hiding, and they survived. But the majority of them were executed. So this was the beginning of it. And this was, I guess, maybe like the beginning of '42 or something like this.

Yeah. So half a year after the Germans have marched in, they march in and in June 1941, these sorts of things start to happen.

Yes. I would say maybe a half a year later, or something like this.

OK. What about your own relatives?

OK. So luckily, [INAUDIBLE] and that day he was in another village, another town to be correct. So he survived it. When he came back, he was told immediately, hey, you have to hide because they were looking for men. And so he was hiding for a few days.

But then [INAUDIBLE] there more motion so he started to go out and they managed to move around. But in the beginning, he was hiding for a few weeks.

And another thing there, since his house was such a beautiful house, [INAUDIBLE] the Germans wanted to confiscate it. But somehow they let them stay in the back of the house. But two German officers took over the most beautiful rooms in the front. And they were living there, two Germans.

Together with your--

Together with Shia and his family. They were living in the back. But later on it became, this was a blessing, because these two Germans had still had some human instinct in them. And they started to know the people. Before Jews were like creatures from nowhere. Who knows what they are? But since they lived so close, and Shia's wife would bring them some food sometimes, a cake or something, so that they conversed a little. And slowly, they saw they are just human like they are. So it became kind of-- they had some feelings towards them, I guess.

Well, how did that affect what happened with Shia and his family?

Well, they were the two that were actually instrumental of their survival.

Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Well, it's again connected with what happened in Griva. In Griva, in 1942, in August or something like this, 1942, this Krakoviak came and he had an order. He ordered all the family, all the Jewish families have to go to [PLACE NAME]. And it was clear, if you go there, it will be a ghetto and probably execution.

So what to do? What to do? And my uncle Joseph still could move around with his special permit. So he decided no, he's not letting us go to [PLACE NAME], because this is a death sentence.

So what he said, you go back now to Shia, and maybe we will find some solution. So [INAUDIBLE] because Jews are not allowed at the time to move freely from town to town. And you had these yellow stars

You were wearing a yellow star?

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

OK.

So what they decided that during the night, my mother and my grandfather will go to, by foot, walk to Manyevich, and they remove the yellow stars. So in case some farmer sees them on the way, he doesn't make a big deal of it. We were walking, and my Uncle Joseph took me. He decided that for me it's too far to walk, to walk 30 kilometers non-stop.

And he was still with the wood business. So every day he would have a convoy of little trains. The trains were driven by horses. It's like rabonyetka it's called. It's a small railroad train. That every time they would bring wood to Manyevich for the bigger train station there.

So he decided at that time, he will take me with the train. And nobody would probably pay attention.

So when the train was about to leave, he took me, put me around him, and we came to Manyevich. And slowly, he smuggled me to Shia's home without anybody noticing. And we stayed there. And the --

Did the two Germans know this?

No, no. Because it all was in the back. It was a very big house. And in the back was so much vegetation, you could enter the house without being noticed.

So we came there. But again, it's during the night. We could not sleep there. So his wife, [Shia's uncle's wife, Sarah, slowly took us to a relative that lived a few blocks away. And that's where we spent the night and also the coming days.

We stayed there, waiting for who knows what. I don't know. I was not fully aware what's going to happen. But we stayed there.

What about grandpa?

He was hiding in the same house. But it was like a barn in the back. So he was staying in the barn. So they couldn't notice him.

And Joseph was still in Griva doing his wood business. Suddenly, he got a notice from Crook's wife that he's back from Russia. And he's organizing a partisan unit, and he would like to talk to him.

Wow.

So yeah. So during the night, they had a meeting. And he said, look, you Jews are going to get killed. You'd better join me. My orders from Moscow is to establish a partisan unit. And I need bodies. I need soldiers.

It was like a present from heaven.

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

Yeah. He said, sure. I know a lot of Jewish young that served in the Polish army. I can bring them. And it's great. We can establish a partisan unit. And this was the beginning.

So who did he-- did he leave you and your mother and your grandfather, and only take young men there? Or did you go with him? What happened?

OK. So he talked to this Crook. He said, OK. I will bring you fighters. But I also want to save my family. So Crook said, OK. If you want to save them, you will be responsible for them. I cannot take care of them. And Joseph said, OK. I will take care of them. Don't worry.

So in the few months that he was meeting with him, he already, this Crook, had already established a place in the forest. As I told you, this was like the Amazon forest. It's deep. Around it is a lot of swamps. And there's only one little way that you can walk without really being drowned in the swamps.

And this Crook knew this way. And Joseph also learned where it is, where's the site. It was like a little island between swamps. And that's the place the Crook was hiding.

And Joseph said, OK. Let's begin here. Bring guys, fighters. And I also want to bring my family to this place.

And so, from Manyevich, did he bring you through the forest? To the forest?

So what happened, how does he contact us, and how does he bring us to this place. So he tried to send all kinds of people. And it didn't work, as far as the messages.

Unless these woman, Darka as I told you, that was working, she could move around. She was gentile. She could move around. With her, somebody sent a note that he's waiting for them in a certain place.

This was a note to Shia, who was waiting for a certain place. And you have to bring all of them. The grandfather, Rivka and Misha, everybody. No one is left behind. And I will meet you in this place. When you come, you tell Crook's wife that you are there and I will come to pick you up.

OK. So they were waiting there, Shia and the family. They got this note. But they did not feel this is the time to escape. It was still OK.

Until one day, these two Germans told Sarah, his wife, you'd better run tonight. Because tomorrow, it will be an Aktion. You may not survive it. You'd better run. OK?

So since my mother and me were living a few blocks away, with a relative, she had a problem. How does she contact us? Because walking during the night is very dangerous.

But anyway, she did it almost crawling on the floor she came. This I even remember today. She knocked on the window. And the other relatives that were staying with them got panicked and started to scream. They were afraid that the Germans would hear the screams.

But she told them, nothing, nothing. It's me. It's Sarah. And then she said, Rivka, come, come with me. And that was the beginning of the salvation. Yeah.

And grandpa?

He already stayed in the barn. He stayed in the barn all the time with Shia.

OK. Ah. So he knew already. He knew already.

He knew already. Yes.

OK.

So we came. We joined them. And I think about midnight, in the middle of the night, slowly, we crawled out between the fences and started to walk fast. Very fast. And 30 kilometers, it was too much for us. So we rested. The next day we made like maybe 10 kilometers or something we did. And continued.

And then we arrived near Griva. And told Crook's wife that we are waiting in a certain place. So for some reason, Joseph could not make it, or he was-- I don't know what happened. He didn't show up. So we stayed there for two days. We didn't know what happened. We didn't have anything to eat or anything to drink.

Were you in the forest at that point? Or were you [INAUDIBLE]?

It was not taken not deep in the forest. Near the village, kind of near the fields. I think we were hiding in a big stack of hay. This was the end of the summer. If you remember, at that time, the hay was collected in such cones like pyramids. So we crawled inside. And we stayed there during the day.

And this was near Griva?

Yes, near Griva. Yes.

One of the things is also interesting, that Crook's wife was not arrested.

Yeah.

Because if he is a known communist, then when the Germans arrive, she would have been the first one to be under suspicion.

Right. But for some reason, nothing happened. Yeah. This was our luck.

So there you are in the haystack. What happens?

So again, we already got panicked for two days. He did not show up. Joseph did not show up. Then he showed up. And

Shia made the contact. And he took us all, the whole group, and brought us to the forest, to this island.

Amazing.

Yeah.

It's amazing.

Yeah.

And so you learned that path through the swamp, to the island that was there.

Oh, yeah.

Was it a large island?

Not really. I would say-- I don't know exactly the dimensions. I would say, maybe, it was like a kilometer by a kilometer or something like this.

OK. But it's surrounded by swamp.

Swamp and forest. Heavy, heavy dense forest.

And was that whole --?

Because this was just the beginning to me. Later on, they moved from there, and the partisans grew. I mean, we mobilized even more people. So the whole partisans moved deeper into the forest. Maybe like 50 kilometers inside, to stay away from any chance that the Germans suddenly will show up or something. So the --

So when you arrived there, what did you see? Can you describe for me what kind of an image it was?

Well, what I remember, walking to the island, some of it you had to go on a little narrow piece of road. You know, like in gymnastics. You have to walk on a little panel.

So for me, it was easy. I was jumping back and forth. But I remember, I helped my grandfather. Because for him, he was shaky. He couldn't keep walking. We were afraid the minute he slides, he can sink down to the swamp.

Sure.

It would be almost impossible to take him out. So this is what I remember, is that I was like in my own game, no problem. We're moving around and helping the grandfather and immediately trying to see any interesting stuff of nature. So a kid looks on these things completely differently.

Were you the only kid there?

At the time, yes.

OK. And where were people living? When you finally get there and you come to where the group is, do they have tents? Do they have shacks? How did they sleep? How did they live?

In the beginning here, there were just all kinds of blankets that they collected through the farmers. So sleeping under the trees. But then when we moved to a more deeper place, they built what they call the zemlyanka. It's like a little bunker that you dig within the ground. And put over it like a little pyramid of wood. And also cover it with mud.

So it also keeps us warm during the winter. And also a good hiding place. Nobody can see it.

How many people would be in one zemlyanka?

Oh, I'd say probably around 10 10 people.

That's a lot.

Oh, yeah.

That's a lot.

Yeah.

So these were not small--

We were sleeping in two rows, with the head outside, with the feet together, yes.

How did you eat?

[INAUDIBLE]

How did you get food?

Yeah. So in the beginning, Joseph managed to get from some farmers some loaves of bread and this stuff. But they did not ask much. So the first thing before the summer was over, they decided to accumulate potatoes.

So every night, everybody except me and my grandfather, they would go out during the night to the fields of the farmers, and they got with their hands. They got potatoes. But they did it in such a way that they wouldn't notice that people did it.

Because there were a lot of wild pigs there, boars. And they liked potatoes. And they had a certain way how to dig them out. So what they'd do, they would dig out just a few potatoes from each plant. So not to make a too big impression that they will notice that people did it.

So every night they would go out, collect potatoes and bring them to the place until they had enough for the whole winter. And they dug deep trenches, put some hay around it, and put the potatoes inside and covered it. So the potatoes can stay fresh. [INAUDIBLE].

And not freeze.

And not freeze.

And not freeze.

Yes. And not freeze. Yes.

And about how many people were in this camp when you first arrived?

Oh, very few. And like I said, maybe maximum 20 people. But they were growing very fast. Growing very fast.

And were you the only family that was there? Or did others bring their families there too.

Later, some other families joined. And I would say, after a few months, it really grew to a civilian camp. That Crook

decided to separate the fighters from the civilians.

And the civilians at that time, slowly-- I think they were maybe around 100 people.

That's a lot. It's a lot to stay secret in the forest. You know?

Yes. And Shia was the manager, actually, of the civilian camp. He organized the food. And actually they served the fighting units this food and clothes and some other stuff. The women that were preparing from wool sweaters and hats, and all kinds of stuff that they needed for the winter.

So it was almost a service unit. They became a service unit for the fighters, the civilian camp.

And were the two camps or locations close to each other?

They were about two kilometers away.

OK. And what kind of activities would the fighters do? What kind of things would they do? Was it sabotage of some kind?

Oh, yes. They got their orders from the Soviet army, from the Kremlin, of course. And they had special missions. Almost every night, they had to send certain units of partisans to blow up trains, to attack the police stations, and to disrupt food supply from the farmers.

Because the farmers had quotas. They had to give to the Germans. So one day, they would collect maybe like 50 cows and whatever, ready to march them to the German camp.

So they would come, knock out the German people that kept them and would take the whole thing away from them. Or as far as the trains, they somehow knew the schedules of the army trains, which are very important.

So they would tell them, in this place, at this date, you have to blow up this train. So they would go there and do it.

And was your uncle Joseph part of this?

Oh, yeah. They established a full regiment under Crook. Crook was the commander. And he had three sub-commanders under him. So Joseph was one of them. And there were two other ones.

How interesting that the roles reversed.

Yeah. Yeah, right. Right.

And were there ever any-- did you ever see anybody else besides Crook-- let's say, any other Soviet partisans or officials sent by the Soviets?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We saw -- one of them was Dyadya Petya he was called. He was a big general that was, I think, in charge of the whole partisans in the whole forest. And we saw many, many Russian army commanders coming from time to time to visit and to teach them how to make mines, to produce mines to blow up the trains.

And did any of them ever comment on the civilians that were in the forest? Was there ever any kind of resistance or unhappiness that there were these families there?

Not so much from the Russian army, or Russians that were sent to supervise. But there were some from the partisans itself, some other units, that they were not Jewish partisans. There were other units-- Ukrainians and Polish. From there, there were many, many times some resistance. And even said, why? Why do we need it? And a few times, they even came and tried to do some trouble.

But Crook always tried to keep us safe.

So they all of the people who were civilian were Jewish?

Yes. All of them. Yes.

OK. And in those two--

Maybe with the exception of one or two that were considered collaborators with the Russians, later on. They were later taken in. I mean, they were in danger that the Germans would kill them. I think there were a few of them with us. I'm not sure. I think there were a few of them.

So can you give me a sense of how long you were in the forests, when you entered, and how long you were there? What year you entered?

So we entered around September '42. And we left spring of '44.

All right. About a year and a half.

Yeah. A year and a half.

A year and a half.

The main thing was the two winters. This was the most difficult time.

Explain it to me. Explain it to those of us who have never had to live in the forest what that was like.

Yeah. Just imagine. You are coming from a 20th century home in Radom. And suddenly you have to live a Stone Age, or even before the Stone Age. Naked in the forest, almost.

So like I said the most difficult time was the winter. And temperatures would drop sometimes to minus 30, minus 40. It's unbelievable.

So we tried to keep warm. We were burning wood all the time. But there's a limit on how much you can stay warm there. We can get all kinds of shmatas, like we say. All kinds of stuff to keep warm. But it was difficult, very difficult.

Was it a danger to burn things so that the smoke was seen? Or were you far away into the forest that that was not a danger?

It was far away. But there were a few times that the Germans would send the [INAUDIBLE] to photograph and probably look for us. So what we would do, we immediately tried to extinguish it, cover it. But this happened rarely. Most of the time, it was so far away that the smoke was not a problem.

But again, the Germans, in the winter, tried what they call a [INAUDIBLE]. They tried to create-- to sweep the forest, and try to clean the forests from the partisans. And they did it during the winter.

So they would bring thousands of German soldiers and just spread them all over and really walk through the woods, and try to find us. Luckily, we knew about it in advance from the farmers and from other informants.

So we would evacuate our areas in advance. But the problem there again it was the footsteps. I mean, in snow, it's very difficult. So we had to go so much. And normally, we would go over a river or something. Then the footsteps suddenly disappeared. They did not know where we went.

So they did it twice in the two winters. In the middle of January, they'll do the most heavy sweeps trying to find the partisans.

Were there any--

I can remember one of the accidents, when we escaped the civilian camp, moved together with Shia. He's my uncle. And the combating units were moving to another place. They didn't want us to be together.

So when the thing was over, when the German sweep was over and we could return back to our original camp, remember. So we were walking back. But the combat units did not know that we were coming back.

And they put an ambush for the Germans. And they thought they are [INAUDIBLE] German. Somebody saw some people moving. And they opened fire on us. No matter how many signals we did, they did not stop.

I remember-- so we had to lie down and almost crawl out back into the forest until we were far away from the-- you could almost hear the bullets. The noise above our heads. This was one of the accidents. We almost got killed by our own partisans.

Did you have any deaths in the camps?

In the combat units, yes. A lot. In the civilians, not so much, no. It's --

How did your grandfather survive it? I mean, he was an old man.

In the winter, this woman Darja that was helping there, I told you about Darka.

She was the maid. And she had a family there. She insisted that the grandfather be brought for the winter to her house. So Joseph did a special trip during the night and brought him there. And he stayed there during the winter.

And again, she paid with her life. This woman, Darjka paid with her life. She perished terribly.

What happened to her?

Finally somebody probably gave her name to the Germans. And from the Germans, I think it came to the Ukrainian nationalists. So almost before the end of the partisan movement, maybe it was the beginning of '44 or something, they grabbed her, tied her to the tail of a horse. And they moved the horse all over the places with a sign, this is what will be done to collaborators. And of course, she died a terrible death. So this is a sad story. [INAUDIBLE].

And Mrs. Crook-- what was the real name? Now I keep calling him Mr. Crook. What is his real name again?

Nikolai Konishtook.

Konishtook So Mrs. Konishtook did anything like that happen to her?

She survived the war OK. But she also came to the camp. She was in the camp. But again, if I'm already talking about Crook, [Ior Kohishtook After the war, the communists took over in there, of course. Griva became part of the Soviet Union. And he became the head of the village.

And after [INAUDIBLE] returned from the partisans, and tried to organize Griva, he was murdered. And he was murdered. And as a punishment, Stalin gave an order that Griva has to be erased from the Earth.

So a few days later, they came. They burned the whole village. And today there is-- my son looked it up. There's a stone, a black stone that says, this village was destroyed by the order of Stalin.

Wow. And the people?

Most of them were sent to Siberia, I guess. That's the 20th century.

Yeah. That's being in a bad geographical location.

Yeah. Like I always say, I was born in the wrong time, and in the wrong place. That's true. That's true.

Were there other children in the camp? But when it grew to its largest size? Or were you always the youngest?

I was always the youngest. Later on came another one. I think towards the end. And he stayed there. I think I even have a little picture with him. The picture as it came when we left the forest. And the Russian army was already there.

They saw us. They said, oh, malchik partisanski. It meets children partisans. They must take a picture of us. So they took a picture and published it in the local newspaper here. Like, oh. Look who fought the Germans. The big fighters here. This was nice.

Are there any other memories that you have of living in the forest? Any incidents that happened that stay in your mind today? Any events of--

Oh, yeah. There are a few I can mention. Of course, there are quite a few during the two years. One of them is two boys, they were probably around 14, 15 years old.

Their function was, normally they would collect-- the partisans would collect old artillery shells that did not explode. And from the shells, they would take out the TNT inside and build mines to blow up the trains.

So they needed somebody with small hands like these two boys because you open up-- I don't know if you are familiar with an artillery shell. There is in the cap something that you screw out. And then you put inside, you can dig out the TNT inside.

Some times you have to open it and scoop it out. And put it in special forms to make a usable mine.

So these two boys were doing it for a long time, preparing hundreds of mines. One day, they made probably some kind of a mistake by removing the TNT from one of the shells. They triggered something. And it exploded.

So I remember to this day, to see their bodies-- part of their bodies, thrown all over. So this is one terrible thing that I remember.

Another thing is, again, the cruelty of the times. And also the extreme power that the commanders, the partisans had in their hand. He was like a god, the commander. He could do anything.

So one of the occasions, Crook was walking with his unit, with his fighting unit to a certain mission during the night. And a Jewish boy saw them. Probably he ran away from the ghetto, maybe from a killing pit. Who knows? Survived it.

So he came and begged for food and maybe they can take him. So Crook said, no. You cannot. We are going to a mission. We cannot. We cannot take it. You'd better go away. We don't want you here.

This boy did not listen and was always running behind them, after the unit. And they told him a few times, you cannot do it. And the boy still was-- they found him again and again, following them. He took out his revolver and shot him, without any mercy. So this is the power that the commanders had at that time.

What did people think of him, of Crook?

Well, they knew him close; they were not afraid of him. They knew who he is, a little boy from Griva. But people that

joined him later, they were afraid of him. He was a very little-- I mean, he was not tall. Very short. And did not make any impression of a big, you know, fighter. But he was, inside, very strong, I guess.

Did your uncle Joseph survive?

Yes, he did.

And your mother?

Yes, she did. We all survived the forest.

Wow.

And your grandfather?

He survived, but got immediately sick. And again, because he was such a religious man, such a-- he did not want to eat anything except potatoes. This was-- all the partisans were eating anything. You know, pigs-- whatever was available. Even there were traditionalists who didn't pay attention.

He didn't want to touch anything of it. And I think by eating these potatoes that were in fire, you know, they were charcoaled. He probably got cancer of the stomach. I'm almost sure it's from that. For two years, eating this kind of stuff.

So the minute the war was over, and they escaped from the Soviet Union, they went to a camp in Germany, at that time. On the American side. And he got sick and died in Germany.

In the DP camp?

Yes.

In a displaced-- OK. So let's come now to-- let's come now to the war ending. And you say that it was in '44? Was it spring '44 that you were able to leave the forest?

Yes. Because the Russian army was advancing and reached our area, our forest. And they got an order to get out of the forest, because what happened the minute the Germans retreated, all the Ukrainian nationalists escaped to the forest. And they were our biggest enemies.

This [INAUDIBLE]. and Bulbovists and all this Ukrainian nationalist movements. They were very dangerous. So they came to the forest. And we had to get out of the forest. It was almost an exchange.

OK. And so where did you go?

Well, to the cities that the Soviet army liberated. Finally, we settled for a few months in Rovno. This was a big city there.

That's in Ukraine, isn't it?

Today, it's in Ukraine. At that time, it was still Poland, yes.

OK.

And we stayed there for a few months. I remember we settled in a Jewish home. Of course, all the Jews there were liquidated, killed. And I remember terrible sights that we saw there. We saw burning of the big synagogue, all kinds of writings in Hebrew with blood. They probably didn't have anything to write.

Revenge. We are getting killed. We saw it on the walls of the synagogue. [INAUDIBLE].

How do you say it in Hebrew? What was written--

In Hebrew, [HEBREW].

[SPEAKING HEBREW]

[SPEAKING HEBREW], yes.

And that means revenge.

Yes. And from the locals, we learned that all the Jews were collected in the synagogue, and from there, they were taken to a nearby forest. They were ordered to dig trenches. And all of them were killed.

And I remember that when the partisans came, the first mission was to see what happened to the graves that they were killed. Because there were many rains, and we could see bodies almost exposed, because they were not fully buried as necessary. So I remember this day that the partisans had to do it again, and buried them in a more respectful way. And --

And this is as you're leaving the forest?

Yeah. Just discovering what happened to the Jewish communities in the cities. And there were some, maybe like 20,000 Jews there in the city. So all of them were slaughtered in this forest.

It's hard to remember that at this point, you're not even 10 years old.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Enough to remember all my life.

How did it change you? How did it shape you?

It's hard for me to be so objective, in a way for myself. I cannot be so objective. Somebody maybe from --

I mean, from the inside. From the inside. How did-- were there certain feelings that you got that have stayed with you as a result?

The main thing was that as a Jew, we need a state. We need a strong army. And these things should never happen again to us. I lost my belief in God.

And again, this [INAUDIBLE] would say the major conclusions I was thinking to myself, that this thing should never happen again. And to prevent it from happening again, again, we need your own state. You need a strong army. And don't rely on God. God doesn't exist. I guess that's enough, no?

That's quite a lot. That's quite a lot.

What about your mother and your grandfather, who were so religious? Did they stay that way?

He remained religious. My mother also. Why? How did she explain it? God helped her to survive. That's another way.

It's another way.

Yeah.

Because of God, she survived. And I let it go. I didn't want to argue with her. But it didn't make sense to me.

What about uncle Joseph?

He also stayed religious. To my surprise. Yeah.

Did he? Did he ever see a contradiction that he had his own internal beliefs, and they were religious, and yet he was fighting for an atheistic regime? Or was it not a question? It was clear, because otherwise it was death?

Yes. It was clear. Otherwise it was death. He did not think even of the regime on the other side. It was his own physical survival.

So you stayed in Rovno, yeah, for a while?

Yes.

How long did you stay there?

Oh, I would say maybe, four, five months.

And Uncle Shia and Sarah and their children, did they survive too?

Yes. Shia -- what happened to Shia. The minute they left the forest, he tried to provide some living means, food and other stuff. So he had an idea to go back to the forest and remove-- we had these big bunkers, a lot of wood. He went with another guy and horses, tried to then load all of the wood and bring it back and sell it in the local market.

While he was trying to dismember this bunker, the whole thing collapsed and killed him. So this is another end of the war-- another nice surprise. So that's his story here.

My mother, myself, convinced that we must leave this place, Europe, especially eastern Europe, no matter what. So from Israel, they started to send all kinds of emissaries. We still have time?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

They sent emissaries all over that said Europe was liberated from the Germans. And one of them came to Rovno. And he said, well, we will help you to come to Israel or to immigrate to Israel. And he organized a group in Rovno, a full group of partisans, and gave them instructions and also some money so they can survive.

And they told them to start moving to Romania. And down there, they have a boat or a ship that one day will come and pick them up. So from Rovno, it took us a few weeks to travel during this-- still the war was still going on. But --

Was there a difficulty in leaving Soviet territory?

At that time, there was so much chaos--

It didn't matter.

It didn't matter. But we did rejoin the Russian army trains. They didn't even know. We entered the train. And the train was going towards the Hungarian-Romanian border. Nobody checked. Nobody saw anything.

Yeah.

It was complete chaos. Until we arrived in Romania. [INAUDIBLE].

I want to come back and talk. But I need to pause a little bit. Something is going on in my house. I need to check it.

Would you wait for me for five minutes?

OK. Go ahead. I will drink some water.

OK. I will shut down and come back. Thank you

OK.