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## **Gershon Yelin Oral History Transcript 3/5/04 – Tape I**

**Luba died at Auschwitz. Your brother Joshua came on a ship, the Parita in 1939, to Palestine, arriving at your door in the cover of darkness, (still in a bathing suit?)  
What about your other sister, Leah, and your brother Moshe?**

Sister Leah and Brother Moshe went to Palestine in 1935

Sister went first to study in an agricultural school, in Nahalal based on a kibbutz

Both members of Zionist organizations, they sensed the trouble brewing in Europe

Brother went to work in kibbutz founded by Trumpedor(?). constantly attacked by Arabs. In the north on the Galilee. Tel Hi – first settlers. Had to battle Arabs, malaria in early 1900's

**How old were brother and sister when they went?**

17, 18, 19 maybe?

**Tell me about your mother?**

My mother and Ben Gurion when to school together. She was very proud of it. Plonsk, small town in Poland. Her father was a rabbi, went out one day and never came back. Doesn't know what he died from. Mother raised her alone. Then her brother died too young – doesn't know if she had more than one brother. **His name was Gershon, so I got the name.**

**Moses in the bible had a son named Gershom – Ger = alien Shom = there To remind him and other Jews who left Egypt in the Exodus**

**For me, I guess, it makes sense because I'm not the perfect American**

**Do you know how your mother met your father?**

No. wouldn't be surprised if it was a matchmaker

**What was there relationship like?**

Well, they had five children. Their relationship was complex, I guess. They were married to the very end. They had bad times, good times. When we lived in Europe, my father wasn't home very much. Once in a while he got some lectures from my mother.

Altogether they were good parents.

**Who wore the “pants” in the family?**

**In a subtle way I would say my mother. If not for her I guess we would all be dead (laughs). She wasn't bossy for no reason - well, she wasn't bossy really. Just persistent.**

**Very nice, sociable, had a lot of friends, ladies. She worked hard - Cooking, cleaning and cleaning and cooking and shopping. Sometimes I couldn't sleep because she was chopping away in the kitchen.**

**What did she make?**

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Chicken soup, gifilte fish – not like the American version. She'd bake all kinds of cakes, apple strudel- oh, that was good. And my oldest brother – sometimes she made a big pan of this strudel and he'd almost finish it and then he'd say he didn't. She was always very busy.

**How did she know that you were in danger, that you needed to leave Danzig?**

She read a lot of history books, was aware that the world wasn't a safe place, never was. Then we lived in the middle of this German/Nazi atmosphere. You couldn't go here, you couldn't go there. You didn't have to be a genius. My father was in denial – many people were in denial – thinking 'they're not going to touch me. I'm a good citizen, I have friends in high positions.' And I guess after you build up a business, make a good life, it's hard to give it up.

**(he mentioned that mother dressed him in lederhosen so he would 'fit in.')**

**Did she know when they were coming to arrest your father?**

She just knew sooner or later it would happen. It was just by chance that he was not in Danzig, he was on a trip when they did. She managed to warn him – sent him a telegram. Then she joined him in Poland. A day or two later, Joshua came to school, took me out, put me on a train alone and sent me to meet them.

**Did you have a bag? Anything with you?**

I don't remember. (wasn't scared).

**The Nazis did come pretty quickly after that to take what was left?**

The Nazis already came to arrest him. That's when my mother left immediately. They couldn't find him. So they confiscated everything – the business, the apartment, the furniture.

**Where was your other sister at that point? Luba?**

She was there. The British government didn't allow children over 18 to go with parents to Palestine.

**I mean how come Luba and Joshua didn't go from Danzig to Poland with you?**

Probably had to finalize things. (Doesn't know where they stayed) Probably with friends.

**Did either of your parents have a bad temper?**

My father when he got older, he could be pretty mean. I think he was depressed, and not well.

**Did they bicker?**

He had some silly complaints. Each time she bought the bread, or Challah, it had to be perfectly baked.

**Did either one of them have a particularly good sense of humor?**

My father had some funny jokes. My brother used to have a little son, a grandson. He'd tell the child 'don't eat spaghetti...it's so long it'll hang out your tush.'

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**Sounds like your sense of humor.**

(laughs) Well, maybe it runs in the family. Sometimes I repeat this joke.

**Any particularly poignant conversations or disagreements or funny anecdotes that you remember?**

Well, – my father was being drafted for WWI, so he had a big scar on his finger, trigger finger, doctors made a hole in the finger on purpose, so he would be rejected by the army.

My grandfather with the long beard – called the Red Wolf - was my father's father. Saw him once in my whole life. They were in Poland somewhere – Jablonka, Poland. A little nothing town. He was an angry old man who wouldn't talk. I was there with some of my little cousins. And we collected bags full of chestnuts. He took it all away, wouldn't let us take the chestnuts. I remember sitting there – he was all alone.

**How did you end up with that photo of him and your grandmother – the one by your bed?**

I don't know. I think my oldest brother Joshua visited more than anyone else. He probably took it. My father was probably there once in a while. My uncles became sort of hoighty-toighty people.

**Your father had a bigger family than your mother?**

3-4 brothers and one sister. She died, and that's when the two cousins came in who joined our family and lived with us in Danzig. Their names were *Abraham (Adek?)* and another Moshe.

**They didn't leave with you?**

One of them stayed and somehow got to Italy and they had these farms where they trained young Jewish men and women to become farmers in Israel. The other one wound up in Trinidad with his wife.

**What do you remember about your sister Luba?**

**I remember when we left her in Warsaw (she was too old to go with them, as noted above). She was crying. I remember thinking 'why is she crying? Why isn't she happy? We're going to Palestine.' Six months later – she was in Poland. She wanted to go to school in Jerusalem, to join us, but she couldn't because the British wouldn't let her in and the university in Jerusalem revoked her admission and gave it to someone else, to someone in Germany. They thought it was safer in Poland. They thought they had to save this other girl and get her out of Germany. But it didn't take long for the Germans to come to Poland. In Israel, we got one postcard from her and that was it.**

**That was the last time you saw her – at the train station?**

**Yes. I didn't want her to cry. We were going to this wonderful place with sunshine and orange groves. Who knew...I can still see it like it happened today. Her face.**

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**What else do you remember about her? What was she like?**

**I was closer to my other sister Leah. But what I remember about Luba was that she was very beautiful. She had a lot of friends. I remember one named Anya. She also had a boyfriend. Somehow he managed to get to the U.S. He joined the American army. After the war he was looking for her and found some documents about Auschwitz.**

**For some time, she wanted to study in Jerusalem. I think she wanted to study humanistic studies. My father wasn't happy about it. He'd say to her: 'Why do you want to go to Israel/Palestine?? The sun, you'll get freckles!' He had freckles more than anybody else. Everybody this side of the family had freckles and red hair. A year or two before all the trouble started in Europe, my father and one of my brothers went to 'inspect' Palestine. They didn't like what they saw there. Which is not surprising because it was still pretty underdeveloped. It wasn't Europe, that's for sure. The language was strange. The people were strange, they said.**

**How did your father respond when you actually left for Palestine?**

Well, he didn't want to go to jail, or to a concentration camp. He knew that much. He knew he couldn't go back because everything was taken away. No place to live, no business.

**Do you remember the name of the ship you took to Palestine (1937 or 38)?**

No, I used to. But I forgot. It was a new ship, a Romanian ship. Nothing huge, but a comfortable, clean, luxury ship. I remember I saw these beautiful foods on the breakfast table. I think it was summer. Anyway there were these beautiful prunes on the breakfast table, in the dining hall there. I went to get one and bit into it and thought 'oh my god what did they do? Give us rotten food?!' It was the first time I had an olive! I remember my father was hanging out with a Jewish man who owned a sock factory who was also leaving for Palestine. They remained friends in Palestine. The man started a sock factory in Palestine.

**Do you remember first arriving there?**

I remember we sailed from Romania, - the port in Costanza, on the Black Sea. We got off the train in Bucharest, the capital of Romania. I remember the station - it was a big city, big station. There was a drunk who was in charge of the station, but somehow we got to this harbor and got on the ship and sailed through the black sea through the Bosphorus which connects the Black sea to the Mediterranean. And then we stopped in Lebanon, so we were in Beirut for a little while. Then somehow we wended up in Athens. I remember flies, flies, flies...in Greece. Probably stayed there a day. And then we arrived in Haifa. We went to Tel Aviv and stayed in some kind of hotel for a few months, I guess. Near the beach.

**Did you go to school?**

It didn't take long. *School was run by the workers party(?)* It wasn't one of those super religious groups. I had a tutor to learn Hebrew. In six months I spoke Hebrew. It took my parents a long time to learn Hebrew. We stayed in Tel Aviv about a year, maybe more.

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**What was your father doing before he bought the farm in Magdiel?**

I think he hung out with all kinds of business people. He also had some family there. You got to know people pretty quickly there.

**What was daily life like?**

It was a city but a community. Grocer would know you by name. Everybody was basically in the same boat. No real class distinctions. And then the war broke out in '39 and changed a lot of things.

**Like what?**

People were cut off from Europe. We didn't know what happened to family members. There was a lot of fear –that the Nazis were beating all these big countries. France fell, and Belgium, Austria, Czechoslovakia ...food shortages started. People used food stamps. We ate a lot of eggplant. The whole country became one big military camp. Soldiers from Africa, America, Australia, Polish troops who escaped to Iran and reorganized here.

Remembers: Germans were a day's drive away from Palestine. British were already planning that we might have to evacuate. Had to paint over all the road signs. The Palmach was established by the British; brother Moshe was in it. Every young Jewish man who could speak German was trained to be part of this underground organization in case the Germans should take over Palestine. All these countries in the Middle East - there would be spies and sabotage, assassinations, whatever they could do

The Haganah existed before – ?

**So you had to worry about the Arabs *and* the Germans?**

**Yes. But there were good Arabs, who we bought vegetables from. They would come to our house and drink tea with us. We didn't go around hating each other. The political and religious leaders were always firing up this hate for Jews – just because they were Jews. Every Friday when they came out of the mosque they would beat up Jews.**

**Before Israel was even established – '46, '47, there were these bands of Arabs who would go around and rob and kill Jews. One night in Magdiel they killed seven or eight people including our watchman, he looked like a sheriff, had a horse and a cowboy hat. They injured one of my friends. I went to visit him in the hospital. Worst thing was when they went to a farm near us - an elderly concentration camp survivor and his wife, and granddaughter – they took the man out and they shot him. Same night they killed seven or eight people. Every night when you went to sleep you didn't know what would happen. Most people kept a pistol under the pillow.**

**Did your parents?**

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**I did. At 16.** You had to hide weapons from the British. There were raids. The British army came looking for Begin, the big terrorist – leader of the Irgun. Looking for him all over the country. There were huge raids. They would search all over.

**That sounds like a scary way to live.**

**It seemed almost normal. In many kibbutzim they found all these weapons and arrested people. Put people in prison. Dayan - Prison break (in Exodus) is true. Today it's a museum.**

**I was a kid. One day my brother, Moshe, told me that they were planning to blow up the railroad tracks – wanted to get rid of the British. He told me to go to the grocery store to buy 2 pounds of pepper – didn't tell me why. They sprinkled the pepper after they put all these explosives down so that the dogs that the army had couldn't follow the trail. I didn't know until later. I knew it was for something secret, but I didn't know what.**

**What was High School like?**

It was like going to college here in America. You had to pay to go. In Tel Aviv. I went to a Private high school – They taught us bible and bible and bible...

I didn't play any organized sports. You didn't have to - you had a lot of sports there in daily life. You worked a lot, went to the beach, rode on horses, camels, donkeys. My main transportation was a bicycle. During the war years, we didn't have refrigerators, we had ice boxes. To get a piece of ice was a major accomplishment. I'd go to the factory where they made ice and bring back a piece of ice on my bicycle. Every day, I used to do 10-20 miles.

Didn't have to do any organized exercise!

Then, we also had military training. Not every night, but quite often. Sometimes I was away for a week or two for training. Sometimes I slept on rocks.

**Was that to get to know the land?**

Yes – and for training.

**Did you train with Ariel Sharon?**

**Yes. Even in the beginning of the war I was often with him. I told you – I was looking at him – I thought this guy was crazy. Bullets were flying all around him and he just stood there. Didn't take cover. He was the Israeli Patton.**

**He writes in his book that people looked at him for leadership.**

He was born for that.

Everybody was in the army. There were no front lines really. We lived like good neighbors all these years and then the trouble started. Even before 48. Arabs shot at our village, we shot back at them. We didn't have as much to shoot with as them. The British tried to break it up. They came in these armored cars and they were shooting at the Arabs. They weren't really aiming just shooting. Then they drove over to the Arabs and were

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shooting at us. In the end they decided 'to hell with both of them. Let them kill each other.' They drove away.

**What was your father doing? Was he fighting?**

**No, he had a job. He had to man the only telephone in the town, which was in the synagogue. Part of the synagogue was the municipal center, the mayor's office, etc. It was built like a fortress.**

**He had to take messages from the phone. There were kids who were messengers who would deliver the news. Other men did it too.**

This was daily life even before the war. The war started before the war started, in '47. You couldn't walk on certain streets in Tel Aviv. Next to Tel Aviv (there was almost no border) was Jaffa, the Arab city. And they had these towers with snipers who would pick off people at random. They killed people who were just walking on the street. Quite a bit of fighting there.

**I remember sitting on some hill, me and another young kid. We were guarding the border and we saw thousands and thousands of Arabs going east towards Jordan, the line looked endless. And we were wondering *what the hell is going on? Where are they going?* This was a few days before we were attacked by the other Arab nations. They were told to get out of the "ring" and that they could come back in a few days. But they never could. They forget all this.**

**What did the women do? Your mother?**

There were many girls in the army. They died just as much as the men died. **My mother handed out bananas.** She did more, but I forget.

**Can you describe differences between Haganah, Palmach, Irgun, etc?**

Once Israel was established, all these military divisions became the new Israeli army. Except Begin's people (the Irgun), the extremists. They didn't want to accept Ben Gurion's ideas ...they had their own plans. *They bought a ship...?( is this the story of the Altalena?) I was standing there on the terrace of one of these seaside hotels looking out – they evacuated half of Tel Aviv. The ship was burning. Ben Gurion had had the ship destroyed. Lots of men got killed. But then they gave up, men joined regular army.*

Ben Gurion was more ? He did what he had to do. Begin and his people really wanted to get rid of the Arabs, kill them all. They would say: Blood and Fire, Judea Fell (when the Romans kicked all the Jews out) and in Fire and Blood, Judea will arise – they really believed it, that they had to kill all the Arabs. It wasn't so absurd because the Arabs had killed all of the Jews.

In '48 – the independent state of Israel was declared. People were rejoicing in the streets. Next day, Arab armies attacked from all sides. Logically, they should have been done in a day.

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**You once said that there were bullets coming through the kitchen windows when you were eating with your family?**

**Yes, there were always so many bullets flying around.**

**Bullets came through the windows from time to time. It was too late to duck. You'd just get lucky. They didn't exactly attack the house, there were just so many bullets flying everywhere. I had a girlfriend in high school, she went to the dentist, she was in the dentist's chair and a bullet missed her by a few inches.**

**Girlfriend? I never heard you talking about a girlfriend. For how long?**

**Until I went to medical school. 3-4 years. Her name was Esther. She came from Europe. She survived the war. They made her into a Catholic girl. Her parents were killed. I thought she was French.**

**Where did you meet her?**

At my friend's house. His name was Daniel. Her name was Esther Oppenheim. My Father would yell at me because I'd come home late.

**When did she go to the dentist and almost get shot?**

During the war.

**Can you describe your house/the farm?**

It was a decent house. Owned by some German Jews before us. We added to it. For that time and that place it was a nice house. Sometimes I had my own bedroom. Sometimes my brothers and I would share. Moshe came to live with us. For a time, everyone lived there. My brothers, cousins. Leah got married and lived elsewhere.

My Father didn't like her husband (who also snored really loud). **'You're going to marry a student who is going to be a writer?? That's not a real job.'** My father was weird – he didn't like things about people. He didn't like your mother's hands – he said they were too delicate.

We had no gas. Then they started to supply gas. We had to cook with kerosene burners – similar to what campers use now. Sometimes they exploded. People got injured. If you wanted to take a hot bath you had to chop up wood and make a fire under the water to get hot water. This was all sort of normal, nobody had any better way. In the summer, it was no problem. You could take a cold shower and it would be very pleasant. In the winter you had to make hot water.

**What kind of bugs/animals did you have there?**

Mosquitoes, bees and wasps, centipedes. In the house, we had mice sometimes. My father was an expert, he'd get the broom. He'd hit them. We had snakes outside. Again, my father was the expert. He saw a snake, it never got away. Once we moved a barrel and found a whole nest of snakes. We killed them. *How?*

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We had chicks in incubators, birds, donkeys, turkeys, dogs – a German Shepard. One day he disappeared, was gone for 2-3 years. We gave up on him. One day, he came back. Had a chain with him – *as though someone had had him tied up?*

**What did you do on the farm?**

I had to feed the chickens. Collect the eggs and prepare them for cases to be shipped to the city. Then there were the goats. I would go out with a sickle, get them food. I knew what they liked. I milked the goats, which we used to make cheese. Cucumbers, pickles, pickled herrings – some we sold, some we ate. I watered the orange trees. I'd dig around them, fill it up with water, like a canal – from tree to tree. Had to harvest the trees?

**Did some planting: Potatoes, corn, tomatoes, alfalfa, carrots, all kinds of vegetables. I remember the potatoes – you'd bury the old ones and a whole bunch of new potatoes would grow in its place. It reminded me of the cycle of life. Generations.**

**What was your relationship like with your parents?**

I had a good relationship with both parents, but not so much with my father. More with my mother. She was happy he I was going to be a doctor. My father didn't show it, but I think he was proud of me. He helped financially. **When I left for medical school in Vienna, my father gave me a good raincoat, a fur coat from the old days – yes, a men's fur coat. I didn't wear it. And a fancy gold watch. Then he told me to meet two people he knew who lived in Vienna and they gave me \$50. Legally, I was not allowed to take out even \$1.00 from Israel. So he probably gave the people in Vienna the money somehow.**

**My father didn't really display his emotions though.**

**The sad part was when I left- I mean when I left for the United States – I knew I wouldn't see him again.**

**So at this point in your life were you practicing Judaism?**

**Not really. Don't know if it was a conscious decision. I'd had my fill of it. Religion wasn't exactly my favorite thing – all these religious rituals. And religious Jews weren't exactly my best friends. I used to watch these fights, Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, they'd fight with the police. Blood was flowing. They opened a pool for men and women, there was fighting in the streets, they had their own area where they all lived together. Women had to be covered from head to toe. They'd beat you up if you didn't live according to their expectations. On buses, Jews would jump because a woman who didn't know any better would sit down next to them. They would jump up like a snake was next to them.**

**You also, in an earlier interview, talked with disgust about the rabbi's you knew who would spit and the one who put a hand on your leg, under your shorts?**

That was at the synagogue in Magdiel: Rabbi - old rabbi, retired but he had a seat of honor right in front, - always dressed well for the occasion

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## **Tape 2: 3-6-04**

### **You wanted to talk about your mother's mother?**

Saw her once when she was old and bedridden. One time she (my mother) took me to see her sister who was taking care of her mother in the same house. She was in bed, grandkids were there, she was begging for her potty and all these children were there and the kids were teasing her and wouldn't give her her potty. I didn't like it. In Poland, same town my mother was born. Ben Gurion was born there too. That's all I remember about this grandmother.

### **Do you think you were more a compassionate child than the other kids?**

Yes. In public school they had these trees, evergreens, they weren't big yet. Kids would bend them down and ride on them. I wrote a whole composition on these trees. Teachers were so impressed. This was in Magdiel, Israel. Before that in Danzig we had to write a composition, don't know if we had a subject assigned or not, but I looked out and saw this tree (what is the thing you eat on Christmas? Chestnuts) and I saw it was blooming on one side but it was not blooming on the other. The teacher then it explained that it was blooming on one side because the sun was shining on it – he was very impressed that I observed these types of things.

### **Can you give more description of the Magdiel Synagogue?**

It was a big building with very narrow windows – to protect the people inside in case of an attack. On top it had a little tower, the roof was flat with a railing. It was used for all kinds of activities; mainly for training. They taught us how to assemble and disassemble rifles, pistols up there. The tower was like a watchtower. You could see all the way to the mountains, the West Bank. It was Beautiful; the mountains changed colors according to where the sun was. Blue, green, gray. So you could see far away. There was an old polish machine gun up there. I remember seeing a man shooting once at the Iraqis who were approaching on a train track. It was just this one gun, but it caused the Iraqis to flee. The synagogue was a hub and a fortress. The local government also had offices there, the mayor.

Inside it was as plain and simple. Nothing fancy. The women had to sit upstairs.

**My father dragged me there practically, every weekend for Shabbat. I'd sit inside, outside, hang out with the other kids. I got sick and tired of it. It was also a center for gossip. Grown-ups were talking about everything. Not always holy stuff. High holidays we'd stay there all day. My oldest brother once fainted at the synagogue on Yom Kippur because he didn't eat all day.**

### **What would go on at your house on the holidays?**

My sister and her husband and the kids would come. We celebrated according to the rules. Passover we'd read the whole story.

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**Was there a troublemaker in the family?**

Maybe one of these cousins. Worst thing he did was when my father died, somehow he managed to take the gold watch. My brothers were angry. My father had this watch from years and years ago, on a gold chain. When he was still in business in Europe he would dress in suits and take his gold watch. Men used to have these little things that they would put around their ankle (Spats?) *Almost like what the soldier...?*

He had a walking cane, not because he needed it, but it was because it was part of the wardrobe then.

He smoked cigarettes. He liked snuff – tobacco. It was a powder and he would add something. He had a fancy antique silver box you put in your pocket and then you take a little bit and you put in here and you (sniffs) and then you sneeze.

**Does it give you a sort of high?**

It wakes you up.

In the synagogue mainly, everybody wanted some. He was handing it out. So everybody was sniffing.

**Maybe that's what the rabbi was doing, not spitting?**

Maybe. I don't remember.

**Did you spend more time with your mother or your father?**

Probably with my mother...more quality time. We talked about things, Jewish history books, newspapers. She would go to meetings, all these Zionist meetings. I remember, once we went to some huge meeting of some Zionist organization, I had to take some public transportation with her to get there.

Father and I went to some movies together. They showed American movies with translation to Hebrew. It's not like what you see here with subtitles, but somebody translated it and you had to wind it according to what was going on the screen.

Sometimes it was off, sometimes it was accurate. For a while, I did that. I got paid for it. Because I knew English. I was 13, 14. Something like that.

**What about your friends. What do you remember?**

**Many of them got killed. (long pause). We did crazy things, we jumped off roofs.**

**Most of the time, we were just hanging out. We started to learn to dance, the tango. We had some parties. Went hiking.**

**Did you have a best friend?**

Yes, we once went on a long trip to see the whole country practically, for a week or two. Ginton was his name. Then he went to study science and to France and he became an atomic scientist and married this fat Canadian girl. They had a lot of babies.

We traveled together before the war – took trains and buses. We visited somebody at a kibbutz we knew at Galilee in the mountains – there was this mule ride up the mountain on these narrow paths. People would fall off. But mules are so short and fat they had this ability to walk up these foot-wide paths. You look down and it's like 800,000 feet if you

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fall off. But you can trust the mules, they don't miss a step. I think we went to visit this kibbutz (name?) where my brother used to be then we went some place on a train that had very narrow tracks. Old Turkish tracks, the train was so slow. People used to laugh that you could get off and pick flowers and still catch the train. We went to the Sea of Galilee where Jesus walked on water. All these places that they mention in the bible, they were still there.

**Did this friend fight in the war?**

Yes, he lived. Another one was a medic in the army; he got killed. There was one kid his head got blown off by a canon shot. And...a few got burned to death. *They attacked this ...the British had about 50 fortresses, police stations all over the country. One of them controlled the road to Jerusalem, they tried to get rid of it - the Arab legion, and they attacked it the day my brother got married. I got the day off to be at the wedding. Many of them were new men just off the immigrant ships, given rifles. Worst thing was that there were wheat fields all over the place and they started to burn, and the men got trapped in the fires. They didn't get shot, they were burnt to death (This is the story from Ariel Sharon's autobiography – what was the name of this place/battle?)*

**Would you have been there if it hadn't been for the wedding?**

Probably

**You had a couple of other near misses?**

Yes, even in Warsaw. When my parents left the gas on and went out. If my parents wouldn't have done it, then the Nazis would have done it. Maybe it was an omen to get out.

**Did you leave shortly after that happened?**

Yeah, it couldn't have been long.

**What about the story, in Israel, fighting...something about a juncture in the road?**

During the war, I had to make sure that these trucks were going the right way. I went the right way and they left me. All of a sudden the Arabs probably noticed that there was traffic there, but it was gone already. The Arabs started shelling, mortar shells were falling all around me. And I was hiding on the ground. Then a bus came by (a civilian bus being used for the military). It picked me up and brought me back to the base. I walked in like nothing happened and everybody looked at me: 'what happened to you? You look terrible.'

**Another story – a near miss - in a school right?**

That's when somebody was playing with a sub-machine gun. Bullets were flying all around me. We were resting and his gun went off. It was like a miracle that nothing hit me.

**What was your troop's name?**

Alexdroni – same as Sharon's.

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**Other military memories:**

*One day – in this Arab village occupied by Iraqis – it happened that all 3 brothers were going their own way. The next morning there was this big attack on the Arab village, funny thing was, they shelled it – but the village was already empty?  
Is this the same village that Sharon writes about? The one your brother Joshua's mortar troop cleared with their mortars? Same one you remember sleeping in for a few nights with sand flies that were biting terribly? Need clarification.*

I remember hiding in a foxhole one night, drinking a whole bottle of brandy. But I wasn't drunk. There were older men there too, not just young men.

**What was your brother Moshe's role in the war?**

He was protecting our VIPs in the government. He escorted them. Then he got into some secret thing. I never knew what he was doing. When he came to visit he didn't just come to visit. He was all over the place. People took him out to dinner, treated him like he was important. Like he was coming to inspect. He made it so secret I didn't know. Nobody in the family knew.

**Was that the norm there? It seemed like everybody was in secret organizations.**

No, this different. It was an official Zionist something. It was like a spy organization.

**What was his cover? What did he tell people he did?**

Just that he worked for the government. In security.

**What did your other brother Joshua end up doing?**

He was in the army...he stayed in the army. Had a pretty high rank. Colonel. But who wasn't in the army.

**But you didn't stay in the army?**

Well, not completely, but once a month you had to serve.

**So after 1948 you didn't have to serve more than once a month?**

No, once I went to medical school they used you for medical services. So you were sort of a base doctor. So all the soldiers complained about back aches but you never believed anybody. The only emergency I had (this was during peace time) a dentist came running he was all upset. They had these old fashioned drills and this one guy swallowed the drill. We told him to eat a lot of bread and it would come out. If something happened, come back. I guess nothing happened.

But in the evening I would drive home. I never stayed over night there. *It was a tank unit?*

**When did you start smoking a pipe?**

Yelin

My brother had a pipe, but I didn't really smoke it yet. I really started smoking when your mother bought me a pipe! Here in the U.S. Every psychiatrist at Montifiore in the Bronx smoked a pipe or a cigar. I figured to be a psychiatrist, I had to smoke a pipe.

**I always thought it came from Vienna or somewhere?**

**No, in Vienna I didn't smoke anything. I just drank espresso. It was a social thing. We'd got to coffeehouses. You could sit there all day long and study. And the waiters would call you Herr Doctor, even if you were just in your first year in medical school. Titles were important – everybody had a title there. Instructor, teacher, professor, doctor – god forbid you didn't use a title.**

**Did I tell you about my last exam there?**

**We had this professor, he was very distinguished in his field. But during the Nazi time he was in the SS and after the war he would still lecture in his full SS uniform. They let him keep on teaching after the war. I don't know why. Maybe because he was the great expert on the subject. The exam was all verbal and you had to stand at full attention in front of him and he would answer questions. Nobody cared that he made you stand at attention like an idiot, like a soldier. He thought he was still in Hitler's army. Everybody in the university went along with it. So, the next day after I passed his exam, I left Vienna. I was through. It didn't break my heart at all to get out of Vienna.**

Earlier they had told me, 'oh you're from Israel. You're must not be a Jew- Jews don't fight. Israeli's fight.

**But you liked some things about Vienna right?**

Yes, the theater, and during Lent they had dances all over at these old palaces. Every night you could go to a dance. There were other places where people could go to drink wine and listen to music. And the people were not afraid either, if you wanted to talk to a girl in Israel is was like 'oh my god.' In Vienna you could just talk to anybody and nobody was offended or unfriendly. In the springtime especially.

**Any other hobbies? Did you draw?**

In school, I used to draw cartoons. We'd pass them around and everyone would laugh.

**I read a lot. The first book I read was Pinocchio. It was such a thrill. I don't know where I got the book. I read it and I couldn't put it down. It was fascinating. It was just a book.**

**Later, in psychiatry, it suddenly hit me: There's a message in this book. This wooden puppet, he wanted to be a boy. If you want to be human, you have to have emotions. And he went through all these emotional experiences. When he was ready, he became a real kid. He needed to have feelings.**

**I read it when I was, I don't know, seven years old. Many years later I realized this message in the book. There are issues about honesty, not supposed to lie. All these**

Yelin

**adventures, he wanted to be brave...then, when he was emotionally complete, he became human.**

My first six months in psychiatry were torture. I thought I'd quit. I went to see the chief and I told him how I was feeling. He just smiled at me. He said, "You're discovering your emotions." It was like somebody took the curtain off the window and everything was clear. (describes feeling depressed). It wasn't a good start anyway. I started training on June 1<sup>st</sup>. On June 18<sup>th</sup> I got a letter that my father died. I didn't know what to do. I would sit at the hospital and then put my jacket on and just walk around the Bronx for hours. This went on for a few weeks. I didn't know why I was doing it. But it was just my way of mourning.

Before, when I was home I took care of him, oh my god. When I still worked in Israel at the hospital. He had a stroke. I made sure he came to the best department. He was lying there in a coma. Nobody gave him any hope. Then, I don't know how many months later, he opened his eyes. He was telling me what we were talking about in his room. He got better and better. He lived for like another ten years. But, from the hospitalization he had all sorts of complications. A catheter. He probably ripped out the hose, but the balloon stayed. And he kept having terrible pain down there. On the X-ray, it showed this big calcified thing in the bladder.

I took him to a neurologist – the doctor pulled it out without anesthesia. I don't know how my father survived that. It's like pulling out a small potato. It was all calcified so it wasn't exactly smooth.

When I worked in the hospital I ran home every day to make sure he took his pills properly. It was 30 minute trip or so. I rode a motorcycle.

He had a heart attack, then a stroke, then years later, another one (heart attack or stroke?)

**How did your mother die?**

**I blamed Sadat for it.**

**In 1973, the Arabs attacked Israel. Syria from the North. Egypt from the South. On Yom Kippur. They advanced quickly. Everyone was in the synagogues praying. Surprised, everyone rushed home. My mother rushed home and she fell in front of the house and managed to get into the house and sit down in a chair. And she sat there for days because she couldn't move. So my brother Moshe kept calling and finally he went there and he broke down the door and he took her to a hospital. And the hospital said, 'sorry' all the hospital beds are taken because of the war. But he knew some people there and they did him a favor. They did an x-ray on her hip and told them that there's nothing broken. They took her home. It turned out that they had x-rayed the wrong side. So she went slowly down hill and ended up in a nursing home. She died six months later, probably from pneumonia. She was in her high eighties.**

**So I always blamed Sadat who made peace finally with Israel. He lost his son in that war too. So I considered her a victim of that war. She didn't die because her time was up. But because of these Arabs who decided to attack Israel on the holiest holiday.**

Yelin

**What happened to the farm?**

It was left in the will for my sister's kids and for my two brothers and for me. A quarter for everybody. And my brothers started to fight. Each one of them wanted me to give them my share. There were lawyers, and letters, and they went to court and it dragged on. They never got along, but this was even worse. Even their children started to hate each other. In the end, my brother Moshe put his daughter and her husband in the house. *Elinor*? And my other brother, his daughter and her husband built a house next to that house. *Daphna*? So they lived right next to each other but I don't think they were very friendly with each other. For a while, my brother Moshe kept the orchard. Then they sold pieces to people who build homes and it became a development.

**What was the street name, address?**

**Hertzl street.** There were no numbers (tells me about Hertzl, beginning of Zionism)

**Did your family have a car?**

My brother had a car. I don't know if he even owned it or if the army did. Those days very few people had a car. I thought to myself 'when I'll be about 55 I'll probably have a little car.'

**Where did you learn how to drive?**

I knew how to drive, but I didn't have a car. I learned in the military. You just drove, there were no real lessons. Usually if you drove a jeep you had 20 people sitting on it, hanging on. If you wanted to travel you usually hitchhiked. It was common. Cars would stop, especially if you were in the army, everybody stopped.

**Did any Arabs go to your high school?**

No

**So when you got to the states you had to take a driving test?**

It took me five minutes. I was lucky – I didn't have to park. It was close to 5 p.m., in the city and he told me to drive around the block and that was it. Then, one of the residents I worked with - his father-in-law had an old Buick. I bought it for \$150 in the Bronx and I drove it to the lower east side (my grandparent's apartment) and I smoked a cigar and I thought, 'wow, now I'm a real American.' (laughs) You know, one of those big old Buicks? And it lasted a few years. It never broke down until one day, in the winter, I came home. I was parking it and all of a sudden I heard a big bang under the hood...someone said time to junk it. Then I bought another Buick, for maybe \$1200. Then I bought another Buick which you wrote about.

So what else is left? Plenty, huh...

**How did you meet mom?**

A Hanukkah party in Jerusalem. There was some play...in a hall or something. They had a party there and that's where we met. She was there to help her sister with her first born child. She came for 3 months...then she stayed seven years.

Yelin

**Was she dating a friend of yours?**

No, he wanted to date her, but I guess she made her choice.

**Tell me the story about the shoe?**

**Her sister's house was on a hill and I guess the road wasn't all paved – a real hill. And we came back from a movie at night and it was pouring rain and we had to walk through the mud and one of her shoes got stuck in the mud. She said, 'ah I don't care.' So first we went to the house and then I went back down the hill and got her shoe. It wasn't a glass slipper but it was a shoe. She had brought so many shoes and clothes to Israel and she didn't really mind that she lost them. But to me it seemed, 'how can anybody give up on a shoe?' Everything was so..goodness...*precious*. In Israel it wasn't like 'oh I want to buy another pair of shoes...' you waited until you had to buy another pair of shoes. Shirts, pants, whatever it was...when I was a kid I had probably ...everybody wore khaki shirts and khaki pants, kids had shorts....and for Shabbat you had to put on a white shirt. If the collar was going my mother would turn it over in the sewing machine and put the good side in front and the bad side in the back. Socks she would darn, fix the holes. Yeah, you didn't waste anything.**

**Did you wear hand-me downs?**

I don't remember that. After the war, clothes came in from the United States...oh my goodness. Every rag was something – oh my- from America! Oh my goodness.

**Were there lots of Americans there?**

Some American students. South African...Jewish. They all got hepatitis (my mother got hepatitis). The local people didn't get it.

**Were you attracted to mom party because she was American?**

In part, I guess. She dressed fancy.

**When/why did you decide to move to America?**

When I was a doctor already, the idea was there that if you really wanted to be considered not prominent but a distinguished doctor you had to spend time in the United States because that's where the makers of medicine were. So many doctors came back from the states after they trained in something. They were considered more educated, I guess. So everybody wanted to go. Our chief, every year he went to the U.S. to hang out with the other specialists and hematologists. He used to come back and tell us how hard the doctors work there. He was such a tough chief. You had to read every journal in the medical library. If you said, 'I don't have time' he'd say, 'well, what are you doing at 2a.m.?' We used to start at 6 a.m. Work until late. And then he came back and said well in American they work hard, in the late afternoon they have a few drinks, they turn red in the face and then go back to work. So when I came here I realized that they really don't work hard at all.

Yelin

But...when I decided to go first I had to go through this interview with the chief of psychiatry at Albert Einstein medical school in the Bronx. He came to visit us in Israel. So he interviewed me...and then I went to the American consulate and started to argue with the consulate. I wanted a Visa for 3 years – a student visa. He said, ‘what are you crazy? You’re married to an American. Take an immigration Visa. If you want to stay, you stay. If you don’t want to stay, you can always come back.’ We argued back and forth and finally I gave in. You felt so guilty, even for leaving for some time.

### **Why?**

First of all, everybody considered you a traitor for leaving the country. And you felt your own guilt...and then, well we went and then later, I decided to stay because I liked the system. I made a mistake, I guess. The system was good then, you could work in a hospital. You could admit your own patients to a hospital and treat them in the hospital. In Israel, you couldn’t. You either worked outside the hospital and if you had to hospitalize somebody you handed them over to the hospital. And that was a sort of separation...the practice. So the doctors who worked outside, in the clinics, were considered second-rate. The doctors in the hospitals were the ‘real’ ones.

And that’s how I wound up in psychiatry – because I worked in internal medicine and so many patients – there was nothing wrong with them. You worked them up and checked and then I became curious why...why do people seem so sick when there’s nothing wrong with them? So I thought I’d find out what was going on in psychiatry. Somehow I passed the examination. I don’t know why...out of desperation? I didn’t listen to the lectures...I didn’t read much. I just talked my way through and they were so impressed they gave me an ‘A’.

### **Were your parents upset when you left for America?**

They were probably unhappy about it, but I wouldn’t say they were upset. They didn’t try to stop me. I guess they were sad.

### **Wouldn’t you say America was a better place to raise a family?**

Well in Israel I didn’t have a place to live really... just in the hospital. And to buy an apartment was a fortune, every junky apartment. So there were these kinds of considerations.

### **Look at Betty (my mother’s sister) and her kids...even some of them have ended up in the United States.**

Yeah, but much later. Kobe was a prisoner of war in Syria. They practically killed him almost, physically and mentally. And his brother – David, was in the army ...then he became a rabbi. Of all people, he’s the last person I would think would become a rabbi. He was a real kibbutznik.

### **What’s that?**

A member of a kibbutz. Not a religious kibbutz. They didn’t care much about religion. They were socialists...almost like communists.

Yelin

**Did you enjoy spending time in Israel with Betty and Aaron?**

Yes.

**What were they like?**

They were very nice. They were nicer in Israel than they were here. Here they always came to buy stuff ...drove your grandmother crazy. 'I need this, I need that.' They came with empty valises, she used to say. They wanted to go home with full, big valises.

**What did you do with them in Israel?**

**Drink American coffee.**

**Starbucks?**

(laughs). **No. Maxwell House coffee. Your grandmother used to send us cans. This coffee was as precious as gold in Israel...you couldn't get real coffee there for a long time. You could buy coffee but you didn't know what you're getting there.** And, I don't know, we'd have dinner and I would stay over there...Well, your mother and I we did things, went to movies. Once she stood me up. I waited and waited there, and she never came.

**Why?**

I don't know. Maybe she wanted to test me or something. And we went out to eat. Real Jewish foods, there was this one restaurant that had all these Middle Eastern dishes...sometimes we would go to my parents. Then we had a visitor.

**Who?**

Aaron's brother, who was a colonel in the American army. He used to get free flights to Israel. A very nice man. He always tried to convince me to come to the states and join the American army. He was a Jewish chaplain in the army during WWII and Korea. Then when he was already close to fifty they sent him to Vietnam. He tried to get out of it. He got there and he died from a heart attack. At least that's the official version. He survived all the battles of WWII...whatever happened in Vietnam...he was probably so aggravated being there. He'd had enough.

**What was the major news event of your life?**

The end of WWII I guess.

I heard about it on the radio. The radio was on for four, five years – always on: news, news, news.

**Did they play music too?**

Yeah, some music, but very limited. During WWII all we cared about was the news. Most of the time it was bad news. **When the British finally got rid of the Germans in Africa which saved Palestine from them that was a big day. We went to see the pictures of the battle El Alamein where General Montgomery beat the Germans, stopped them – the end of the German army in Africa (1942). That saved us – that was a big day. The British were about to leave Palestine...assumed that the**

Yelin

**Germans might advance. There was a movie of the battle that went about ½ hour, we went to the movies to see it and we couldn't get enough of it.**

**There were all kinds of great days, and then of course, the end of the war. And then when the United Nations voted for partition, and when Ben Gurion declared Israel to be an independent state. There were a lot of miraculous days...**

**Where were you when you heard about Israel becoming an independent state? Probably home, I guess. Yeah...I was home. I was home, I went to the orange grove where we had a little steel case buried with a pistol and a hand grenade that my brother brought...I took out the pistol and started to shoot into the air like the Arabs usually do when they celebrate. People were dancing, and singing. And then the next day, we were bombed by the Egyptian air force.**

**Was that a surprise?**

It wasn't a complete surprise, but it was *an accomplished fact(?)*, supposedly, except later it ended in this war with all these local Arabs and all these armies from the Arab nations around us. It ended with a peace agreement but the Arabs never kept it. We signed a peace agreement, but they forgot quickly about it.

(asks himself – what other big days?) **When WWII ended...I remember being very happy. August of 1945, I was walking in Tel Aviv and the radio was reporting news. I heard it through the window of somebody's apartment on the street. The Americans dropped the atomic bomb and they described more or less what they did. I had no idea what an atomic bomb was but I was happy...'ah, now the war is really over.' First the Germans capitulated. But then this war was still going on with Japan, so that was the end of WWII for real. I was thrilled...now I wish that we had never invented the atomic bomb. At the time, I just knew it was something horrible that made Japan stop fighting.**

**I guess there were all kinds of sad things and happy things.**

**Do you remember when the war (WWII) started?**

Everybody thought 'oh well, the war won't take long.' Germany will be finished. How can the Germans win against this big British Empire, and France...with this huge army that they had. *The Maginot Line??* you heard of it? They built a whole city of fortification on the border with Germany. They just forgot there was Belgium next to it. So the Germans just went through Belgium, there was no fortification there. And in no time they beat France, and England had a terrible time because they weren't equipped for war. They didn't listen to Churchill. Chamberlain came back from talking to Herr Hitler, who promised he wouldn't invade Czech...but he didn't keep his promise.

**Another great day was when I met my teacher/principal from Danzig.**

**Here?**

**Yes, in the Bronx...a man that, when I was a boy in Danzig, I used to think 'oh that's what God must look like. So tall...'**

Yelin

**You were surprised that he survived?**

**Yes...and he remembered me. It was a happy day.**

**Was that a happy time in your life – in Danzig?**

**Well, I guess I didn't know any better. Yeah, it was okay. I didn't know that it was weird that I had to go to a Jewish school. It seemed okay to me. I didn't know that it was the law. Not a written law, a sort of decree that Jewish children are not allowed in the German schools. And ...sort of you don't understand as a child. So we still went to the beaches. Then they wouldn't let us go to the beaches anymore so we had to go across the border to Poland (laughs). We'd take the train. You couldn't do this, you couldn't go here.**

**I even used to enjoy watching the Nazis marching...I didn't know any better. It was such a sight. The band, the military band, guys marching. They were beating up the communists and the police came with long baskets and they threw in these people who had gotten beaten up and they carried them, like in a big laundry basket. Probably took them to prison. Because communists were still trying to stop the Nazis...but they were helpless.**

**I had this little German friend. I used to visit him...he had such toys. He used to tell me that the man who was there, his 'so-called' father was not really his father. He would tell me that his real father died on the Titanic. (laughs). Probably didn't know who his father was.**

**They lived in this little like a basement apartment. His current father was shoemaker...**

**We were good friends.**

**So you spoke German then?**

**That was my first language. I didn't speak Polish. I understood a little bit.**

**When did you learn English?**

**In school...probably in Israel. English was one of the three official languages there - Hebrew, Arabic and English. Every sign was in all three languages.**

**What language did you speak in your house?**

**German, a little Yiddish...my older siblings they spoke Polish. They used it if they didn't want me to hear something. I knew it was something I wasn't supposed to hear.**

**Did I tell you about my first memory – which I don't know if it was a real event?**

**The one about leaving...my mother was holding me, on a train. I was a baby and she was talking to her brother, this Orthodox Jewish man, dressed in black with a long beard. She was talking to him through the window. And somehow, I've never been able to figure out if this was real. I think Freud called these memories screen memories - memories that seem real but aren't. Yet they are symbolic. This one is symbolic of having to travel from place to place to place. And this man, my uncle I**

Yelin

**guess, sort of symbolized all those Jews who wouldn't live long. Who would be killed. And the fact that we left by train – it saved us - while other trains took millions of Jews to their death. Well, you can go on and on with this. It seems so real – this picture. Maybe I dreamt it.**

**What place where you lived do you have the fondest memory for?**

Well, even in Danzig it seemed like a good life until it became bad. **In Israel, I loved it because ...I would get a thrill just taking the bus from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem - watching this tiny thing that was planted get a little bigger. It was like watching children grow. Now they're forests. They used to plant these little seedlings in the rocks. I don't know how they took hold there but they did. They planted them...they gave them a cup of water and that was it. In the summer it didn't rain there but somehow enough survived and grew and grew and each time they seemed bigger and bigger.**

And medical school in Jerusalem was good. Didn't have much money but it was good. And then I did my internship and my residency at this hospital – the same one where I used to always think ( it was right next to the highway from Tel Aviv to home) every time I passed it - I thought someday I'll be working there. And then it became real. So there were a lot of special days...

**What was the experience like having your first child?**

Yeah! I think she was born on the day I took my psychiatry exam...I went to the hospital (in Israel) Your mother was in the hospital for a month because her water broke early. So I went to the hospital and her bed was empty. She had Nili and I looked at this little thing and told 'mommy' she has two little legs that like two little frankfurters. It was a big thrill. When I had time I used to take her in the carriage and walk her around and everyone would say 'oh what a beautiful baby' ...I was very happy. When she got bigger they had this nursery school right on the hospital grounds. I used to put her on my shoulders and take her to nursery school. Yeah, it was good.

**And then by #3 it was still good?**

Yeah...Dr. Shragowitz almost cried – 'she's not a boy.' I thought 'what is this man crazy?' I looked at you and I was happy. I never told him, he never asked me what I wanted. He just kept lamenting. I guess he believed that I was probably dying to have a son. He apologized.

**Do you think there's any hope for peace in the Middle East?**

I believe in miracles. I saw too many not to believe. That they didn't wipe us out in '48 is a real miracle. So no matter how bad it looks now I still believe there can be another miracle. So, yeah, I believe. Sometimes I say, 'oh what the heck' Israel should just become another American state. But that's not because I don't believe that there can be peace it's more like they've become so Americanized.

Yelin

**Do you believe that the Jewish people belong in Israel?**

Yes, just like I believe the Americans belong here. And the Spanish and the British and everyone else just grabbed whatever they could. We didn't do anything other nations haven't done. Anyway, they didn't invade Palestine and take it over... whatever land they had before the state was born was bought. Rich Arabs who owned the land, it was more like a feudal system. The regular people were poor, and the rich owned all the land and the orange groves....*(gets cut off here...do you want to expand?)*