

Good evening. My name is Toby Ticktin Back and I'm the director of the Holocaust Resource Center in Buffalo. This evening, our guest is Gregory Shershnevsky. And he was born in 1941 in Vilna, Lithuania. Gregory, will you tell us about your early life, the stories that you told me before?

Well, as you said, I was born in 1941 in April Second World War II already continued for two years. But it was two months before Soviet Union entered the war. War with Soviet Union began in June 25 of '41. And I was born in April. So I was two months old. And Vilna was occupied almost the same day. I think, June 22, German Army already entered Vilna.

And actually, first day, they announced that all Jews had to move to so-called first ghetto, which occupied few blocks of downtown. At that time, my parents were not in Vilna because immediately, as war began, they decided to move out of Vilna. They knew what they can expect. They tried to go ahead of German Army to escape. But they were captured in White Russia and forced to go back to Vilna.

When they came back to Vilna, first ghetto was already organized. And all the relatives of my father were already in ghetto. My parents knew that they wouldn't be able to survive outside of ghetto. They will be executed immediately. So they voluntarily went into first ghetto, which was eliminated, I think, in two months-- in two weeks, probably. And all Jews were moved to second ghetto, which was even smaller in size.

Do you know how large it was or how small it was, essentially, how many city blocks?

Maybe two, three city blocks.

For how many people?

I think that at highest point, there were up to 100,000 Jews. Not just Vilna Jews, they brought Jews from all surrounding villages, small townships, and so on. In the beginning, everyone had work permit and was allowed to work or inside of ghetto or outside, under German supervision or whatever. And as the beginning, my parents had working permit. But as soon German started execution or elimination of part of ghetto, they took away working permits. And a number of jobs were eliminated. My parents lost their working permits. They had to hide.

What kind of jobs, what kind of work did they do?

I don't know. I don't know. They were working outside of ghetto, that's all I know. But I think that after four or five months, they already lost working permit. So they were hiding for two months. And actually, from day of creation of ghetto, first who were eliminated were small children. My father later on told that they call it action, children action.

And during first children action, my parents had working permit. So they legally could keep me. During second action, they somehow survived. I even don't know how. But when they got to know that there will be third children action, my parents knew that they won't be able to hide me anymore and save me anymore.

Somehow, they got in touch with Polish woman who lived in the city. She originally was from White Russia, moved to Vilna, I think, two weeks before war. Her name was Aleksandra Dziewiecki. I don't know how my mother got to know her. But there was agreement that she will hide me.

Did your parents have to pay for that?

No. I never asked my father, but knowing Aleksandra Dziewiecki, I'm absolutely convinced that there wasn't any payment. In November of '41, my parents put me in garbage can, covered with some kind of garbage, and smuggled me out of ghetto to house of Aleksandra Dziewiecki and left me there. And after, probably, they were working when dropped me off, they continued to work wherever they work at that time. And they got back to ghetto. And I don't think that my mother ever saw me again. They stayed in ghetto. They both went underground in ghetto.

What does that mean, to go underground?

It means that you don't have any papers. You cannot show on the street because there was even Jewish police, there were SS, German SS. You cannot work to provide food. So you simply cannot exist.

So how do people who were underground, how did they exist?

Only those people exist who were part of resistance because the resistance had communication with outside world, outside of ghetto. They brought somehow food. Or they made raids on various houses and brought food. Who wasn't part of underground resistance, they simply died. And because my parents took part in underground resistance, actually, they were among organizers of Vilna ghetto resistance. They survived somehow. I was, at that time, from November of '44, living with Aleksandra Dziewiecki.

No, it was in 1944?

I'm sorry, in '41.

'41.

In '41, from November '41. When I was brought--

Excuse me. So you were an infant? You were just a few months old?

Yes, I was seven months old, seven months old. And I didn't look as a Jewish child. So Aleksandra Dziewiecki took me to city hall, or [NON-ENGLISH], at that time and told them stories that she found me on her steps and she wants to adopt me. And because I look like Polish boy, she says that she assumes that I'm Polish. She wants to give me Polish name.

And she gave me a name, Stanislaw Marian Kostko. I don't know why the last name was Kostko, but it's up to her. And I stayed with her till liberation of Vilna. In 1943, I don't know, I think in middle of 1943, my father organized escape from Vilna ghetto. I think it was second escape first was successful escape through sewer systems.

Through the sewers?

Yes, through the sewers. My father organized second escape. But they were betrayed. Somehow, Germans found out about that escape. And originally, ghetto-- only resistance fighters left ghetto. There were maybe 30-40 of them. They were armed. But when they were passing through a small village, where a big group of Jews from ghetto was already working, people in their group understood that there was escape. And they joined that resistance group.

They got to some small river or creek, which they had to cross. They waited till late at night. They didn't know about ambush. And when they began to cross or just approach that river, machine guns from all over. Following day, my father found only seven of them.

Only seven survived?

Yes.

Was your mother among that group?

No. He didn't find my father-- my father-- I'm sorry, my mother wasn't among survivors. No one really knows what happened. Later on, we were told that some people in ghetto following day saw big trucks passing by. And someone recognized my mother in that truck. So we assume that she was executed in place where all Jews from Vilna ghetto were executed. And immediately after liberation of city, my father tried to find some records. He couldn't find. But definitely, she was executed at that place.

The Germans didn't have any records of those executions?

They had for some. But my father didn't find any records of my father. But it was only one place where they executed, and especially after escape. So during that ambush, more than 140 people were killed on spot from all of them.

Including your mother?

Including my mother. Or she was captured and executed in a place which calls Ponary.

Ponary forest massacre.

Yes, yes, yes. This is a place. At that time, I stayed with Pani Aleksandra Dziewiecki. When I was brought to her, I was seven months old. So I didn't speak yet. And when I began to speak, whenever and whatever it was, I spoke only Polish language because she taught me only Polish. She didn't speak Russian. She didn't speak Yiddish, of course. So I grew up actually in totally Polish environment, talking only Polish, and recognizing only one name, not Gregory, given me by my parents, but Stanislavas, or Stasik, she called me. And I never called her by name until I grew up.

Did you call her mother in Polish?

Actually, yes, mother. In Polish language, mateÅ„ka is very soft mother. Till I grew up and understood meaning of word, I thought that it was her name. I grew up with that word, mateÅ„ka, but it was mother. In 1944, as soon as city was liberated, my father, knowing where I am, picked me up from her. And since then, I stayed with my father.

Wait, excuse me. Let's go back a little bit before your father picks you up.

What do you remember about your early, what is it, four years with this woman?

Not too much. I remember-- and as I told you, I thought that it was dream from childhood. But later on, when I met Aleksandra Dziewiecki in Poland, she told me that it looked like it was true. I remember that basement, apartment in basement, because she was too poor to rent a real apartment. So she stayed in basement apartment, very big space divided into big kitchen with wooden stove in one corner and big bedroom or only room--

Or beds.

--or only room in her apartment filled with beds.

Well, did she have other children?

Yes. There were a lot of beds. I can't recall right now how many beds there were. But I think at the highest point, she had something like 14 children, none of them, of her own. All of them were like myself, brought by parents. Or she knew that their parents were executed so she adopted. She didn't carry of religion, she didn't care of nationalities. There were Polish children, Jewish, White Russians, Russians. They just care of children.

She was a very good woman.

Absolutely. She was really saint woman, in a sense.

What did she do for food to feed you all during these hard years?

As far I know, and I don't remember already who told me so, in the same apartment house, or part of apartment house, in our courtyard was occupied by German hospital. And she worked as nurse during the day in hospital. So she was making her living and feeding all those kids from whatever income she had in hospital. Probably had chance to bring some extra food or whatever.

She needed clothing for you too.

Yes, of course. And as far I know, I wasn't only one Jewish child in her family, big family. Later on, when I met her, she gave article from paper, article was written immediately after liberation of city in '44. And that article describes face of another girl, I am positive that I met her being child, but I don't remember her, of course.

Her fate was even worse than mine because my parents brought me or smuggled me out of ghetto. And they knew about upcoming children action in the beginning of ghetto existence. That girl was born in ghetto. And her parents gave her name Gittela, from ghetto-- Gittela Gitelman.

Her parents and entire family had to hide between two false walls during any search, when Germans were looking for Jews for next executions. They were hiding. And the baby was crying. So in the beginning, when it was short search, maybe few minutes or few hours, her grandfather covered her mouth with his mouth and gave her to breathe through his mouth. But later on, from starvation and illnesses, that baby was crying constantly. So during another search, they kept her under anesthesia. She was for almost a week.

Anesthetized for almost a week?

Yes, almost a week. So actually, she was dying already. Somehow, her parents got to know about Aleksandra Dziewiecki. And through their friend who lived in the city, they pass her to Aleksandra Dziewiecki. But Gittela was typical Jewish girl.

Dark, I presume.

Dark, Jewish nose, typical. So Aleksandra could not bring her to city hall to register. So together with her friends, they made doll in size of baby, brought the doll to [NON-ENGLISH], city hall, and told them that they found baby. And it looks like the baby has some kind of illness which can be transmitted. So no one wanted even to open that package.

Oh, so that was secured then?

Yeah. In such a way, she got birth certificate and registered Gittela. After obtaining birth certificate, she would be able to place her into the hospital, typical Jewish girl, knowing that if someone will discover, both of them will be executed immediately. She placed her into the hospital and saved her life.

This woman thought of everything, it's very courageous.

Absolutely, yes, yes, very dedicated woman. So this I know about another event. And later on, I don't remember, somewhere in middle of '70s, there was research in archives about all Christian people involved in Vilna in savings of life of Jewish not just children, adults, Jewish people.

There were found-- what do you call it, affidavits, or-- from people who live now or at that time lived in Israel, who stated that she saved the life of their children. I even didn't know about their children. Maybe they stayed for a short period of time. Somehow, they were not mentioned in article I obtained from Aleksandra Dziewiecki when I met her in '67.

Maybe we should have some things projected on the screen. And then you can tell us about those things. And the first thing we have is a picture. Tell us about that picture, please.

This is picture of my uncle, my mother in the middle. Uncle is on the right side. Picture was taken probably a few years before war. They were born in Kolky village in Ukraine-- western Ukraine, which used to belong to Poland, and after 1940, became part of Soviet Union. It was very big Ukrainian village, about 6,000 total population. 2,000 of them were Jews and 4,000 Ukrainians.

All of Jews were executed in that village. At that time, as far I know, my uncle took part in underground activities against the Polish government or whatever. My mother was going in Vilna to medical nursing school. I think she was going to nursing school. And at that time, that picture was taken. Who is gentleman on the left, I don't know.

So this is before she meets your father?

I think so. I think it before.

And this is the only picture you have of your mother's?

Yes, yes.

It seems like there's a similarity in the eyes there.

Maybe.

Yes. And the next item on the screen is a birth certificate. Do you want to tell us about that?

This is birth certificate, Pani Aleksandra Dziewiecki to register me as a Polish boy. And you can see, it's in Lithuanian language. And I don't recall already Lithuanian language. But it says that parents are unknown because she told that she found me on the street. And she registered me under the name Stanislavas Marijonas Kostkas-- Stanislaw Marian Kostko.

On opposite side of that birth certificate, there is date that I was registered in November 18 of '41. It seems to me that this is a duplicate of original birth certificate because all dates are here from '43. Maybe she lost original and asked for duplicate.

Do you know why she called you Stanislavas?

I don't know why. I think that because Stanislavas is holy saint in Christian religion.

You said, she was a very religious woman.

Very religion. I think that everything what he has done for all children, not just Jewish children, was moved by her deep religious beliefs.

She was a true Christian.

And we have now the picture from the newspaper.

This picture, you can see, Pani Aleksandra Dziewiecki in glasses above.

That woman who saved you?

Yes, this is the woman who saved my life. And below her, that white boy, blond boy, is myself.

You look very non-Jewish.

Yes. As far I understand, this picture was taken in 1944 by Russian military correspondent, who wrote article about that lady. And she actually was discovered because she saved the life of a Russian major, who was--

That's an interesting story. Why don't you tell us that story?

In 1944, as far as I understand, she was probably 61, I think 61 years old. And during fighting for liberation of Vilna,

she saw some person falling down in our courtyard. She didn't recognize uniform. She didn't know it was German soldier or Russian soldier. And as far I understand, she didn't care. She saw person needed help. And being old person, she lived under bombing, machine guns, she left her basement, went to the courtyard, and brought the wounded person into our basement.

And you remember that? You were so little, but do you have an image?

Like in shadow, yes. And she actually saved his life. And it happened to be major of Soviet Army. And when city was liberated, probably some medical people, or she reported, or they found that major in her apartment. And this is a way, I think, her story became known to Russian authorities. And military correspondent visited us. I don't remember, of course. But later on, there was article published in a military newspaper. And for the rest of her life, she kept copy of that article cut out of paper. So I think that this picture was taken for that article in '44.

And how did you get the article?

Immediately after war, my uncle, who was on picture with my mother, was sent to Poland to organize a new government. The reason he was sent, because before war, he was citizen of Poland. And he knew Polish environment. And he still lives in Poland. And in 1967, finally, I had chance first time to visit him in Poland. I knew that Pani Aleksandra Dziewiecki left Soviet Union in 1957.

How did you know? Were you in correspondence?

We were in correspondence. But I saw her not very often. After I was taken to my parents, I visited her at least once per year for Christmas celebration, to celebrate her holiday. So I knew where she was. And I knew how many children she had. At that time, none of children she kept during the war were with her.

But immediately after the war, she found baby on her steps. It was already first time-- a real life story. She really found baby on her steps. So she adopted that baby. And a few years later, she convinced young pregnant woman not to have abortion, not to kill baby, and promise that she will take baby. And they never will see each other again, which she really did. That lady delivered baby. Pani Aleksandra Dziewiecki took that baby and adopted him. So in '57, with last boy remaining with her, she moved to Poland. We were exchanging some letters.

Can I just ask you, may I ask you why she moved to Poland?

Before moving to Poland, maybe a few years before, she continued to have two boys she adopted. Suddenly, mother of boy we found on her steps showed up.

Oh, the first child.

Her first child. She was woman of bad behavior, but probably making--

Prostitute?

Prostitute, yes, probably making good money. And she convinced that young boy-- he was maybe 10 years old at that time-- that with mother, he will have much better life. And boy escaped. And Pani Aleksandra Dziewiecki was left with last one boy, Janek, or John in English. And Pani Aleksandra worried that maybe similar situation may happen--

Oh, that the child might be--

--with last one--

--taken away from her.

--in one way or another, legally or he will escape. So she decided to move to Poland, where she had distant relatives,

just to save this last one child. So in '57, she moved to Poland. But being very, very poor-- the only income she had in Soviet Union, it was government pension she was awarded for saving the life of the Russian major, which at that time, it was 60 rubles. But Russian government doesn't increase pension because of inflation.

What is 60 rubles equivalent-- or what was it?

In that time, in late '40s, it was pretty good money. In early '50s, you could survive. Now, probably, it will be weekly pay. It's nothing.

So she was struggling.

Yeah, absolutely. And when she went to Poland, that money was converted into Polish currency. And at that time, it was 15 zloty per ruble. So she was getting 900 zloty for both of them. She couldn't support child with a such low income. She gave him for adoption to another family. She hoped that that family really will take care of boy, and give him education, and so on.

It was very noble for her after running away to keep the child, to give him up for a better life.

Yes, yes. But it didn't happen. She saw that family which adopted wanted just to use him as, actually, free labor. And as far I know, she sue that family and got child back.

Oh, she got the child back.

Yes. And later on, I think he went for military. But knowing that she is in Poland, in '67, when I first time visited my uncle, we made trip across entire Poland, we found her in very, very poor financial condition. Her health was OK. She was over 80 years old, probably 82-83. I don't know exactly of her age. But amazing was her memory.

In the beginning, at first moment, she did not recognize me. But when my uncle said, this is Stas from Vilna, she immediately recognized me. And just by looking on her face, you could read all her feelings deep inside and her thoughts.

First, she wanted to cry from happiness and immediately thought, if I will cry, it will ruin our meeting. She somehow hold herself without crying. She smiled, kiss me. And we began to talk. Her memory was amazing. She remembered everything, almost, it seems to me, every day of our life.

And at that time, I told her story about the way I remember that basement. I thought it could be dream. She said, no, it's exactly the way it looked like. And I told her another story, asking, was it dream or was it in reality?

And stories such as I was awakened, or as everyone in our basement, by knock into the door. It was middle of the night, curfew. So someone illegally got into our apartment. And when Pani Aleksandra opens the door with candle, I just saw man in some kind of uniform or it was remaining of military uniform giving something to Pani Aleksandra. And he immediately left.

And Pani Aleksandra brought to me small cake, maybe inch wide, inch tall, and maybe two inches long. Strangely enough, immediately after war, there were selling similar cakes in Russian stores. And because I saw them later on in the Russian stores. I thought that maybe, it was dream. But at our meeting, Pani Aleksandra told me that it really happened. At that night, resistance fighters from forest had a raid on German food warehouses.

Oh, they had a raid on the--

Warehouses.

--warehouses that belong to the Germans.

Yes. And they picked up, as part of food supply, those cakes. So my father, on their way back to forest, step by and left one piece of cake for myself.

For you. Look at that image that you carry that you remembered from 1944 to 1967, all those years.

Yes. Until I met her, I wasn't sure it was reality or it was--

Oh, that's amazing.

--dream. So a lot of things, I found out at our meeting. And I was amazed to see that she kept moving out of Soviet Union and moving in Poland from one place to another. She kept that birth certificate. And she kept that article in her own private archive.

Oh, and that's when she gave you both items.

Yes. Probably, she understood that it would be our last meeting. And there wasn't any sense for her to keep it any longer because it will be just totally lost. So she gave me as reminder of her good deeds to me-- or actually, she didn't mean anything. She just give me. But for me, it's really a reminder of her.

It's a very special remembrance.

Of course.

Was that meeting quite emotional, I presume?

Yes. We couldn't get back to our normal life for months. It was very emotional feeling for both myself, my wife, and actually, my uncle was there. Later on, my uncle tried to help her financially. But she passed away one year later.

All right. Now, we're back in 1944. And your father is coming to get you. It's the end of the war for Russia, and Poland, and Lithuania. So he picks you up from? Oh, here's a picture of your father here.

Yes. This picture was taken immediately after the liberation of city. He is in a semi-military uniform. As you know, forest resistance fighters--

In the resistance, the partisans.

--they were wearing whatever they could get hold of. And this is a Russian-made machine gun. Picture was taken immediately after the liberation of city. So he knew where I was. And he did not continue fighting. He was released from partisans. And he stayed in Vilna. So he immediately wanted to pick me up. And of course, as far I understand, he called me the name--

Gregory.

Gregory, original name they chose with my mother. And being called for four years Stanislavas, of course, I didn't respond to Greg. And somehow, my father decided, maybe from a respect to Pani Aleksandra Dziewiecki, or for whatever another reason, he decided to leave that name. And since then, in home of my father, I was Stanislaw. And among all my friends, in school, in kindergarten, even I entered school as Gregory, among all friends--

You were still called.

--I was called as Stanislaw. And even my wife today calls me Stanislaw.

I see. So when your father picked you up, you resumed a normal family life with your father?

As normal as it could be for any Jewish family in 1944 in Soviet Union.

How soon after that did your father remarry?

Maybe a few years later.

Sure.

I don't recall exactly, maybe '47, maybe '48. But his second child, or my brother, was born in '49 so probably somewhere at '47, '48.

So you a brother that was good for you and you had a stepmother who took care of you?

In some way.

Some ways.

We have a picture of you with your uncle. Maybe you'll tell us when that was taken and how old you are.

I don't know exactly, was I eight years old, 10 years old. I think that this picture was taken before my uncle left for Poland because during war, he was in Soviet Union. In 1939, my uncle, David, and--

Oh, this is your mother's brother.

This is my mother brother, uncle David. In 1939, he was a political prisoner in Polish jail. That's the same jail where my father was, was the same as political prisoner. And as soon World War II broke down, all political prisoners were released from jails. Somehow, and without knowing what direction to take, they moved to the left and they met Russian Army instead of going to the right and meeting German Army.

Oh, that was fortunate, wasn't it?

It was fortunate for them. So he went to Soviet Union. And during World War II, he was in Soviet Union. I don't recall name where. Somewhere in mid-Asia, there was placed where all Polish people were kept until their fate was decided. And many people read in papers that the Russian government was organizing Polish Army.

And as soon as my uncle found out about Polish Army, he sent application to Moscow, describing his past, his involvement in underground activities against the old Polish government. He was called to Moscow. And in Moscow, they decided that they can find much better use for him. And at that time, they didn't care that he was Jewish. And immediately after, a Russian Army went to Poland. And Poland was liberated from German.

As far I understand, Russian government organized group of people to send to Poland to organize new, communist Polish government. And as soon Polish communist government was established in Poland, the Russian government began to help them, experienced people. And my uncle was experienced in economics. So he was sent to Poland. And before leaving Soviet Union for good, he visited us. And I think that this picture--

Oh, I see. It was taken.

--was taken at that time. And this picture, as you know, opens up book, which was published, written by my uncle in Poland. It was published before 40th anniversary of Warsaw ghetto uprising. It was published in Warsaw.

Has that book ever been translated?

Into English?

Into English or Hebrew?

I don't think so. I know that it was distributed all over the world because this is story of his life, story of people he met, and all people all over the world-- in Israel, in Brazil, in Argentine. People who came from the same village he came or who fought together with him were interested to obtain this book. So I know that it's all over the world.

We don't have too much time left. But I'd like to ask you, Gregory, do you know what happened-- do you know whether this woman who saved your life was ever made a Righteous Gentile at Yad Vashem?

I don't know for sure. I hope she was. And the reason I hope, that baby Gittela I told you about, her parents found her immediately after war. And they got to Palestine immediately after. And in '67, when I visited Poland and I met with Pani Aleksandra Dziewiecki, she told me, Pani Aleksandra, that she is in constant communication with Gittela's family, not just with her parents, already with grown woman. And she showed me Gittela's picture. Gittela at that time had two children. So I hope that Gittela, having much better access, has done it.

To made her a Righteous Gentile.

I hope so.

Which means that you haven't been to Israel?

No, I haven't been yet.

So you don't know. But when you do go, you can find it.

Yes, I will find out. And if it's not, I will do it definitely.

In conclusion, do you have a message that you'd like to give as far as the Holocaust is concerned and what happened to you and to other people?

My personal experience, as you saw, it's very unique experience. And when we are talking especially about interrelation between religion, Jews with the Christians and what happened during the war in Poland, of course, my personal experience does not erase Auschwitz--

No.

--does not erase lack of help to Warsaw ghetto uprising, but it shows that we cannot make everyone equal across the board as our enemies or people who wish us bad. Example of my fate, and example of Pani Aleksandra Dziewiecki shows that there were hundreds and hundreds of decent Christian people who saved a lot of Jews.

Thank goodness for you. Thank you very much.

Thank you. Thank you.