

My name is Max Michelson. I live at 26 Ridgefield Drive in Framingham, Massachusetts. I am 56 years old, married. My wife, Julia, is a social worker. She was born in the US, and I met her in New York shortly after coming here from Europe.

We have two boys. David is 26 and is now in medical school, and Gregory, who is 23, just finished his undergraduate work in chemistry, and plans to continue in the same field in the fall. I'm an electronics engineer, and specialize in the design of radar systems.

I was born in Riga, Latvia in 1924, and lived there with my family until the war started. My family comes from that area. My father was also born in Riga. And his parents come from Courland, which is the westernmost province of Latvia, where they have lived since at least the early 1800s. My mother comes from Vilna, and her family lived there also at least from the early 1800s.

In Riga, we had a large extended family with various cousins, probably numbering 30 or 40. My immediate family was smaller. I had had an early-- a older sister who had died in the early '30s. And so, at the time of the war, start of the war, I was an only child.

My father, David, and my mother, Erna, lived together with me, and a brother of my father's, Eduard, in a large house in a-- slightly away from the center of Riga. We had lived there since-- they had lived there since 1900, when his father had purchased that house, and my grandmother had lived with us until her death in 1933. My grandmother was a rather strong and domineering woman. And it obviously was her household. And my mother worked in the factory, in our factory, which was adjoining to our house, where she ran the office for my father and his brother.

My parents were well-to-do. They owned a plywood factory, which had originally been established by my grandfather and which had been expanded under the management of my father and his brother. His brother, Eduard, was an engineer who was much interested in social issues, and who had, in his earlier days, been active in the socialist Jewish organization, the Bund. I also believe that he had participated actively in the 1905 Revolution.

My father, who was more conservative, politically, was an active member of the Riga Jewish community. He was a director of the Jewish bank, the Norddeutsche Bank, and he was also a board member of the Jewish hospital, the Bikur Holim Hospital. I remember that he spent many evenings away from home at various charitable or business organizations.

My first language was German, which was the language mostly spoken at home, although my father and mother also often conversed in Russian. In Latvia, the Jews spoke German, Russian, or Yiddish. And the people coming from Courland, the western province, were mostly German-oriented, particularly the affluent members of the Jewish community. And in our background there was a considerable looking down on Yiddish as a language. Yiddish was called "jargon"-- jargon.

I am quite sure that both my father and my uncle spoke and understood Yiddish quite well. I am also sure that my grandmother spoke Yiddish, although she never acknowledged this. She was thoroughly oriented toward the German culture.

My mother, on the other hand, coming from Vilna, was much more oriented toward Russian. In fact, while she spoke German fluently, she really was much more at home in Russian. I had, while I had been familiar with the sound of Russian, and understand-- and understood some of it, I really knew German and did not know Russian at all.

Latvian was the language of the peasants, the Latvian peasants. And it was not regarded as a suitable language for Jews. We mostly knew enough Latvian to get along and to deal with the general population. My father spoke quite well because he had to in his business dealings, and with the officials, and et cetera. My mother, on the other hand, really never learned even an acceptable level of Latvian, and just knew enough to go to the market, and to deal with our cook, who was a Latvian.

My mother had a-- my mother had a high school education, a gymnasium education. She was very well read and spoke, in addition to Russian and German, a very good French. My father spoke French, although not as well, and he also spoke some English, which he needed also for business, as we were exporting plywood to England as part of our factory's output.

I started my schooling by attending a German elementary school, but had to transfer in third grade to a Latvian school. In 1934, the democratic government that had ruled Latvia since the establishment of its independence in 1918 was overthrown by one Janis Ulmanis, who established an authoritarian fascist government. Prior to 1918, the country had been part of the Russian tsarist empire.

Under the new authoritarian government of Ulmanis, the minorities had to attend either their own ethnic schools-- in other words, Jews were permitted to go to Jewish schools-- or they had to go to Latvian schools. Jews could no longer attend a German school, such as I had been doing, and I therefore transferred in third grade to a Latvian elementary school, where I finished the elementary school through sixth grade. After that, I attended a Jewish high school, the Ezra School, where the language of instruction was Hebrew with some Latvian thrown in for the Latvian language and Latvian history, et cetera.

In the elementary school, we were-- in the Latvian elementary school, we had a grade that was at least 50% Jewish. A lot of the other kids in that grade were similar-- were under circumstances similar to mine, transferred from German or Russian schools and had to attend the Latvian school. Following the completion of that school, they too transferred to other Jewish schools.

In Riga, there were a number of Jewish schools. There were schools in Hebrew, in Yiddish, and, prior to Ulmanis, in German or Russian. With the decree of Ulmanis of being taught in one's own ethnic language, the schools, such as the Ezra School, which had previously been a school with German instruction-- with instruction in German, changed to an instruction in Hebrew.

The Jewish affairs under Ulmanis were guarded and represented by the Agudas Yisrael, the ultra-Orthodox organization, which had a great influence with the Ulmanis government, and which was particularly in charge of the Jewish affairs at education ministry. Under the leadership of Agudas Yisrael, the Jewish students were forced to observe religious-- forced to attend religious services, so that during those years at the Ezra high school, we had to attend Shacharit services daily.

At the Latvian high school, we were excused from attending the Protestant religion classes. We could either go out, or we could sit quietly and listen, but we did not have to participate in the religious classes for the general non-Jewish student body.

We were, however, given special Jewish religious classes once or twice a week after the regular, where we had to stay after regular school hours, and where we were taught by a special teacher who came in. I don't believe he was a rabbi. He probably was more like a melamed, a teacher who came in just for this purpose. I am sorry to remember that we took advantage of this poor man because he would not think of denouncing our bad conduct to the Latvian principal. And we took full advantage of this situation, and behaved like hooligans, and made his life generally miserable.

The Jewish community in Latvia, prior to World War II, consisted of about 100,000 Jews, about half of whom lived in the capital Riga. There were also large Jewish communities in Dvinsk, where my grandmother lived, in Mitau and in Libau. And in fact, there were a number of Jews settled throughout the provinces.

The country had a history of antisemitisms-- I mean, antisemitism. I mean, the Latvians were well known to be antisemitic, although during the democratic government, from 1918 to 1934, there was Jewish representation in the parliament, the Saeima. And there were Jewish religious parties. And in fact, Jewish political parties and Jewish organizations flourished at that time.

Under Ulmanis, under the authoritarian regime, the Jewish life got much more proscribed. There was a lot of overt antisemitism, particularly in the application of the official rules and laws, which differed quite substantially when a

Jewish business or a Jew was involved, so that the antisemitism was quite noted, and the discrimination was very much felt. On the other hand, the discrimination in Latvia was probably no worse than that in Poland or in the other Eastern European countries.

World War II broke out in Western Europe in September 1939. While we were well aware of the events there, being able to follow them by radio and by, to some extent, by our slanted newspapers, which were certainly pro-fascist at the time, there were no active hostilities involving Latvia before the June 1941, when the Nazis attacked the USSR. However, in July of 1940, Latvia was occupied by the Red Army as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement dividing up the spheres of influence in Eastern Europe, and giving the Soviet Union a free hand in the Baltic countries-- Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The Soviets took over Latvia in July, and rapidly proceeded to set up a Soviet state, a Soviet Republic. We were the-- Latvia became the 15th Soviet Socialist Republic. And proceeded also to nationalize factories, to nationalize apartment buildings and other bigger stores.

Our factory was promptly nationalized, as were some of the apartment buildings in the area that we owned. Our house, which was a one-family house, and it might not have been nationalized normally, was, however, nationalized because it was adjacent to the factory property, and therefore we were not permitted to stay there. We had to move out of the house by December of 1940. And we found a small apartment in a suburb of Riga, in Kaiserwald, where we were not known, and where we had few friends or relatives.

My father was not permitted to work in the factory after its nationalization, nor was my uncle, who was the chief engineer, had run the factory, had direct charge of the technical operation of the factory. My father found a job, after several months of looking, as an economist with a trust and organization. I believe it was the Light Manufacturing Trust. My uncle also got a job as an engineer. I do not remember where. My mother did not work under the Soviet rule, but she stayed at home at this time.

For me, the most visible change to the Soviet rule was that now, at the Ezra high school, the language of instruction was Russian. While our Russian knowledge was somewhat limited, we proceeded to learn all the subjects, which had previously been taught in Hebrew, in Russian.

We also had a lot of instruction in the obligatory Marxism, Leninism, and in the history of the Communist Party, and the communism in the Soviet Union. I remember very distinctly our instructor in these subjects, who was a communist from the political party, from the political organization. But what impressed, or, rather, revolted us most, was that he very obviously walked around with a revolver in his coat pocket whose outline was clearly visible.

As at school, there was a frantic pace to studies and to various extracurricular activities, a Young Communist program was organized. This was an activist program. Although I did not belong to either, because my background, as a member of the-- or a child of the bourgeoisie, did not permit me, didn't give me the proper credentials to participate in these activities. There were also student councils organized that acted primarily as rubber stamps to validate certain decisions and orders that were passed down to us.

The Latvian population resented the Soviet takeovers-- takeover of their country. They were, by and large, with the exception of a small number of communists, violently anti-communist. And they equated communism with the Jews, even though the Jews were, as often as not, persecuted by the communists as well. But certainly, the Jewish bourgeoisie was persecuted by the communists.

It is interesting to note that the antisemitism by the Latvians was not only found among the fascists, but even the Latvian communists were notably antisemitic as well. An important occurrence in the Jewish life in Latvia during the Russian rule happened in mid-June of 1941, when deportations of the bourgeoisie and of refugees from Germany started in Latvia. The deportations were done by picking people up in the middle of the night and giving them only an hour or so to pack a small suitcase, as much as they could carry. And then they were taken by truck and cattle car out into the Soviet Union.

These deportations had a very depressing and stunning effect on the Jewish community. I should say that the deportations included many more Jews than their proportion in the general population, and a fact that was ascribed to the situation, that the lists for the deportees were prepared by Latvian communists, and who therefore singled out the Jews for the deportations.

The deportations continued for about a week. And I remember distinctly that after the first night, when we had not been picked up, we slept the following nights without our suitcases at the ready, fully expected that we would be picked up and deported, if not on the next night, then very soon.

The fact that we were never picked up is probably due to the change of our address. We lived, as I had indicated before, at a new apartment in the outskirts of Riga, where we were not known, and which probably resulted in the fact that we were not deported. At the time, we thought that that was to our advantage, although subsequently, I must say that the people who were deported had a much better chance of surviving the war than did those that fell into Nazi hands a little later.

The deportees were treated in wildly different manners by the Soviet Union, and no fixed pattern could be discerned. Some just were deported to middle Asia, to Tashkent and other places like that, where they lived through the World War II, while still others ended up in work camps, some in the far north of either Siberia or European Russia, and had to live under very difficult situations, at famine, like food situation, extreme cold, and very hard work.

However, contrary to the treatment under the Germans, the Jews were not murdered directly by the Soviet-- by the Soviets. Rather, some camps had conditions where survival was difficult, but it was not one where the people were directly murdered, as was the case by the German Nazis.

The fact that these deportations had occurred in mid-June did influence the decision by many Jews in Riga not to escape to the Soviet Union in front of the advancing German armies. Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 22, 1941, and Riga fell to the Nazis on July 1, 1941. In this time, it was quite obvious, both from the news broadcasts and from the scenes in Riga, that the Red Army was quite demoralized, and was unable at that time to put up an effective resistance to the advancing German army.

I remember that our family had repeated and long discussions as to whether to-- it would be appropriate and smart to try to escape from Riga to the Soviet Union. The Soviets actively discouraged any evacuation or escape by the civilian population, and the escape was also made more difficult by the fact that the Latvian partisans operated in the woods and along the highways in eastern Latvia, and intercepted many of the people who tried to escape to Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, some people escaped. A friend of mine, Michael Lowenstam, who was a son of the principal, and who was a communist youth member, and did pack up his stuff and leave without even saying goodbye to his parents, who stayed behind. Our family decided not to escape, and as I have indicated before, the-- rather the shock of the midnight deportations that the Soviets had instituted just two weeks earlier was very vividly in our mind, and I believe had a-- was a major factor in the decision not to try to get through to the Soviet Union.

Riga fell to the Nazis by July 1, 1941. The Latvians immediately organized volunteer paramilitary groups and police groups, which proceeded to round up and murder Jews throughout the country. The murders were certainly permitted, if not encouraged, by the Germans. But the Latvians really didn't need any encouragement in this area. They, particularly in the countryside and in the smaller towns, the Jews were rounded up and shot immediately. In the bigger cities, they were also arrested and murdered.

There were also some arrests of Jews in Riga, where they were brought to the central police station, the prefecture, and Jews were tortured there. Were variously-- they were mutilated before being killed. In addition to the murders, some Jews were taken to prison, where they were held for some time before murdered at a later time. A lot of Jews were rounded up for various work details, clean-up details, that would clean up some of the damage of the fighting. And following the work, they were either murdered or taken to prison and then murdered at a later date.

My mother was arrested at that time. She was taken to work one day and then ended up in prison. The detailed

circumstances of her arrest were as follows.

I had been working in a furniture factory during this summer, and I continued to go to the factory even after Germany fell to the-- Riga fell to the Germans, even though the factory had sort of stopped working. But I got out of the house and spent a good deal of the time walking to the factory or walking some other places.

In any case, one evening, when I came back, I found that my father was home alone. And he related that my-- the police, the Latvian police, had come to take him to work--

My father was 11 years older than my mother, in his mid 60s. And my mother suggested that he was too old to go to work and that she would go in his place, and which indeed she did, so that she was taken to work. And my father stayed home.

My mother never came back home. I found out later, in January of 1942 from some Latvian contacts that she had been at the central prison at least through January. But by February, she was no longer there, having been murdered some time in January of 1942.

By the end of July and early August, the various edicts were passed. First of all, that Jews were not permitted to use the streetcars. The Jews had to wear stars on their left breast and on their backs. And finally, the Jews had to move out of their city apartments and move into a special area in a Riga suburb, the Maskavas Forstate, which had been vacated so that the Jews could move into.

There was a frantic looking for places to live in that area. It was a rather small area, and a total of 32,000 people moved into that. We moved what little belongings we could from MeÅ¾aparks, Kaiserwald, the place where we had lived, to the ghetto, in mid-August. And we-- my father had been able to find a place for us to live, as well as for my uncle Eduard. We lived in one big room, which we shared with another family, of a husband, wife, and a teenage daughter whom I knew from school.

We settled to life in the Big Ghetto with the expectation that we would be there for some time. People had brought various staple foods with them, which they proceeded to hoard, because they felt that the food would have-- these staples would have to supplement the rather meager rations for some time to come.

The ghetto was administered by a Jewish council of elders, the Altostenrat. And my father found, I believe, some employment in one of these organizations.

I remember working in the old age home that was part-- that was the old Jewish-- it was the Jewish old age home that was part of the-- in the ghetto area, and which I remember distinctly how overcrowded the place was.

I also started to take some lessons to continue my education. I particularly found a former teacher of mathematics who gave us some lessons in trigonometry. But that was not to last very long.

The ghetto was closed by wire fences and gates and Latvian police guards on October 25, 1941. In late November 1941, it was announced that the ghetto would be emptied, and that the people would be transferred to another work camp. I believe they-- the word was that they would be taken to Salaspils, another camp some 20 or 30 miles away from Riga.

The emptying of the ghetto, or as it was called, the Aktion, or an action, started on Saturday night, November 29. And the first half, the western half of the ghetto was emptied that night. It was obviously not a simple transfer of people, because during the emptying, many people were murdered right in the streets. They were shot for no obvious reason right in the streets of the ghetto.

On Sunday morning, September 30-- November 30, 1941, I saw a column walking through the streets. We lived in the eastern part of the ghetto. And I walked out of the house toward the backyard fence, and looked through the crack in the fence. I saw a column of people walking toward me.

It was still dusk. It was probably 8:00 or 9:00 in the morning. But it was rather dark still. And the column of people, four abreast, were walking under a heavy guard by the Latvian police, or volunteer guards who walked with drawn guns, or drawn rifles. The impression was quite harrowing. It was quite obvious, to me at least at the time, that this was no ordinary resettlement, but rather it looked like a death march. I hurried back into the house not waiting for the column to come closer to the place where I was hiding.

The Aktion ended by noon or 1 o'clock on Sunday. And on Monday or Tuesday, a small work camp was opened in one part of the ghetto. And it was announced that the men only could go into this small camp, where they would stay in Riga and be used for various work details. Women were not permitted into the small camp, although some women were smuggled in.

As my mother was no longer with us in the large ghetto, there was no issue between my father and myself of leaving her alone. And we therefore, with very little hesitation, moved into the small ghetto as soon as possible. I should say that the sight of the deportation column that I had seen in the morning played a major role in my decision, and in fact, in urging my father to come with me into the smaller ghetto-- into the Small Ghetto.

We found ourselves a place in a two-room apartment, a kitchen and one big room, which we shared with five other people, five other men. We lived there. We had mattresses on the floor. And the room was essentially wall to wall filled with mattresses and whatever little belongings that we had taken with us from the Big Ghetto.

This is the continuation of my story. And this is Max Michelson recounting the events during World War II.

My father and I were now settled in the small ghetto. And I don't remember whether I started to work immediately, or whether I worked in the following week. I do remember that during this week-- that was a week between the November 30 and December 12, 1941-- there was an uneasy calm in the remaining half of the Big Ghetto.

The western half of the Big Ghetto had been emptied, and the people had been taken to the Rumbula Forest, where they were killed, although at the time we did not know that, and we really did not want to believe whatever bad news were available. There was some circumstantial evidence both from the Latvians, Latvian population, and also from some people who were said to have managed to escape from the killing, that everybody was shot in the Rumbula Forest not far from the Big Ghetto.

We found-- the majority of the people in the ghetto, I believe, found these news too threatening, and the preferred belief was that the people had been taken to a other camp. There were also some unconfirmed reports that letters had been received, or notes or letters had been received, from the deportees.

In any case, the remaining half of the ghetto was in a state of anticipation and an uneasy calm. And I remember that on several occasions I visited friends, notably my school friends from my age, who had remained in the Big Ghetto. In many cases, these were girls, who were not permitted to come into the Small Ghetto.

I should say that many men remained with their families, rather than leaving their wives and daughters and coming into the Small Ghetto. For my father and myself, this really was not an issue, because my mother had been arrested earlier, so that there was only the two of us. There were only the two of us. And we both had gone into the Small Ghetto.

The Aktion, or rather the deportation, started again on the night from Saturday to Sunday, December 7, 1941. And as in the first deportation, there was a lot of killing right in the ghetto. People who were found hiding in their apartments, people who were unable to walk, were killed outright on the spot. Again, the people were marched out of the ghetto and marched to the Rumbula Forest, where the killing continued.

By Sunday noon, the ghetto was empty, and small details of work, or small work details were selected in the Small Ghetto to bury the dead who had been shot in the ghetto. I was in a detail that did the grave digging, and I remember that it was rather difficult digging because the ground was partially frozen. We were digging the graves in the old Jewish cemetery, which was at the outskirts of the large ghetto. And we were digging graves on top of old graves where we found at the bottom of the pits that we dug, often we found the skeletal remains of the previous-- of the people

whose graves these had previously been.

Among the dead at that cemetery, I saw many people. There were probably maybe as many as 100 dead. Among them were some very young infants, a child maybe not older than six months, looked like a broken doll. They all had been shot.

The following Monday, and on the following days, I continued to go to work. The details were-- work details were formed early in the morning on the street, and then were marched into town. The march was quite long, as often as not, 3 or 4 miles each way, maybe even more for some of the jobs.

The jobs were different kinds. A lot of them were clean-up jobs. Some had to do with maintenance jobs for the German army, or maintaining buildings, moving furniture, working in supply depots. There was also jobs building-- moving earth, earth-moving jobs, and in factories, in wood-cutting factories. The earth-moving jobs and the wood-cutting factory jobs were the much less desirable ones because there was no added food available, and no other things that one could steal and then trade for food back at the ghetto.

I don't remember where I worked at the time, but I did work every day, going to work in the morning and coming home late at night. These were very long days. And it was rather tiring to do the walking and then work. My father did not go out of the ghetto to work, because he found the walking overly tiring, and he preferred to find a job, some kind of work within the ghetto, either internal clean-up or whatever.

On Tuesday, December 9, '41, when I came home from work in the evening, I did not find my father at home. We were told that during the day, the Germans had rounded up all of the people who had remained in the Small Ghetto and had taken them away.

At the time, we thought that it was a-- also it was on another job detail. But as time progressed, and they did not return, it became obvious that they had been taken to the Rumbula Forest and shot, as this-- particularly since this was right in conjunction with the killing of the majority of the people in the Big Ghetto.

The people taken on this Tuesday from the Small Ghetto were primarily elderly and the sick who could not walk daily to the work details, and who were therefore murdered by the Germans. The people had been taken from the Big Ghetto in city buses rather than walked in columns. But this also had been usual for the killings, because these city buses had been requisitioned by the authorities in charge-- by the SS, which has been in charge of the Jewish affairs, and which had been commanding the killings.

I, following the murder of my father, I continued to live in the same apartment with the other men, in particular a friend of the family, a rather young man in his early 30s, Mr. Julius Crohn, took the place of my father, or he, rather, assumed a paternal role vis-a-vis me. At that time, I was 17 years old. And he acted somewhat as a provider in terms of trading watches and other valuables in town for bread and other foods so that which would supplement the rather meager rations that we were given in the camp.

We generally did some communal cooking in that apartment, although I must say that the people did not, unless we were sort of lived close together, and were-- and dwelt together like Mr. Crohn and myself, we did not give each other any of the supplemental food that we were able to obtain on the outside.

I think at that time, I had some rather undesirable jobs, although I do not remember the exact places that I worked at that time. Somewhat later, I was, through some relatives, in somewhat more influential positions in the ghetto, able to obtain a job at the dairy, where there was some lifting, carrying, and general dairy work to be done, weighing of and packing of cheeses and so on. And this was a very desirable position, because obviously there was some food available that could be eaten, and some taken home even. And it was also, in dealing with the milkmen, the Latvian milkmen who went on the rounds, they usually were black-marketing bread, which I was able to buy from them.

Bringing food or other material back into the ghetto was very hazardous because there were occasional spot checks at the gate upon our return. And the results of being caught with bread, or other foods, or some other stolen material or so,

were disastrous. In many cases, people were taken to prison or killed, in some cases even killed outright on the spot. I should relate that my friend, Julius Crohn, was in fact caught fairly soon bringing bread back into the ghetto. And he was arrested and killed for that.

I must also relate a somewhat earlier incident about my Uncle Eduard-- this was still in the Big Ghetto-- when he was arrested and taken to the Latvian Nazi Party, the Perkonkrusts, the Thunder Cross Party, on Valdemar and Elizabetes Street, where their headquarters were. He was taken there, and he was away from the ghetto for about two or three weeks.

He returned in rather bad shape, and related that he had been tortured. I don't know, because he did not talk to me, but rather to my father, about the actual reason what had-- what the interrogation had been. But I believe it had something to do with some contacts with Latvians.

In any case, after a week in the Big Ghetto-- this was in October, prior to the emptying of the ghetto-- he was rearrested. And that was the last that we heard of him. He obviously was killed upon the second arrest.

At this time, I had no immediate family left. I knew I had a number of friends, some cousins, and a distant uncle. But I remained living in the apartment where I had lived before. and with the other people with whom we had gotten somewhat friendly during this time.

I continued to work at the dairy for maybe a year or so. There were other jobs, that things changed, and I was employed in a warehouse of recreational goods for the German army. Then, later, I was employed at army motor car garage where they were-- where some Jews were working as mechanics in the motor car garage. Others did the general housework, like getting-- cutting the wood in the winter for the stoves. And a number of others were working as artisans, tailors, furriers, watchmakers, locksmith, carpenters, et cetera.

Very many Jews were working as artisans. And this really was a fairly good job, because there was contact with the German army, as opposed to just the SS. And in some cases, they was able to-- some bartering, some selling of various valuables that we were able to get, find, or get from other people in the ghetto. And that provided some of the people with an income.

The state of mind in the Small Ghetto was really fairly bad. There there were the pessimists and the optimists. The optimists had a kind of unrealistic hope that our loved ones who had been taken away might still be alive, whereas the pessimists were, in fact, much more realistic, and viewed what available evidence there was, to indicate that the people had in fact been killed, and that the chances for our own survival were rather bleak.

The war news, which we were able to follow by listening to British radio primarily, got progressively better as the German offensive was halted by the Russians. And slowly the Germans were pushed back. I should say that even then-- and that was in the late '42, early '43, in those years, I had a firm conviction that the German-- that Germany was doomed to lose the war. However, the paramount question was whether we would be able to last to see the Allied victory.

The Large Ghetto had been resettled by Jews who had been brought from Germany, and some from Czechoslovakia. These transports came to Riga. And in almost random fashion, some of the people from some transports were taken directly to the forest to be killed, whereas others were resettled in the Large Ghetto, the ghetto that had been emptied previously of the Latvian Jews. And many of these Jews, the German Jews, actually survived to see the day of liberation.

Among the Latvian Jews, there was considerable resentment toward the German Jews. There was some feeling, however irrational, that the ghetto had been emptied of Latvian Jews to be-- to make room for the German Jews, and that there was some preference by the Nazis toward the Jews from Germany. This was probably quite untrue, particularly since the German Jews were also killed in large numbers in Latvia. It was just that Latvia was a good place for killing of Jews, because the local population not only didn't mind, but actively-- had actively participated earlier. And as the SS General Jeckeln told at his trial after the word in Riga, "Latvia provided a fertile ground for the killing of



Jews."

The Small Ghetto-- and, for that matter, the Large Ghetto-- persisted through 1942 and 1943. There were some changes at the time. There was usually excitement with searches and some arrests for various things, like taking bread or so.

One of the more notable events in the ghetto was the so-called weapon affair, when a cache of small handguns and hand grenades were found hidden in one of the backyards. These weapons had been brought into the Small ghetto by people working at the German arms depot, and had been intended for a break of the people who wanted to join with the partisans.

It was not clear how the weapons were found. I believe somebody, a Jew had been caught on the truck with the partisans, and under torture, revealed the existence of that thing. In any case, the German police came in, and searched and found these weapons.

The Jewish ghetto police was apparently involved in the arms cache, or in any case, the Germans assumed so. The Jewish ghetto police consisted of mostly young men in their early 20s who performed miscellaneous, mostly administrative duties. On that day, all the Jewish police was rounded up on a big square in the German ghetto, and they were surrounded by the Germans with submachine guns, and killed there. Among the people killed was a cousin, a second cousin of mine, a David Kaleman.

With the situation in the Small Ghetto deteriorating, many people tried to find jobs or work positions with various organizations in the city, where they could stay completely away from the Small Ghetto. Such jobs were called [NON-ENGLISH] or a place where you would live away from the small ghetto, were established with various organizations. One was with an SS outfit at a factory called Lenta, where they were mostly artisans, tailors, jewelers, furriers, shoemakers, et cetera, who worked there. There was another such place at the motor repair shop that I was working in. And I also was able to live away from the Small Ghetto for three or four months. I don't exactly remember what.

In the meantime, in Riga, there was started the construction of a concentration camp, concentration camp Kaiserwald. It was very close to the suburb where we had lived prior to the war. And the energies of the Jews went mostly into trying to avoid getting into this camp, because the working and living conditions in the concentration camp were drastically worse than the ones in the Small Ghetto, or certainly much worse than in the various working places where we could live.

By the 1944, the Small Ghetto was closing. In fact, I think it had closed already. And the places now-- the places where we lived in town now became-- came under the administration of the concentration camp Kaiserwald. Politically, the German army was suffering defeats on the Eastern Front. The Russian-- the Red Army was advancing, and the Germans had lost Stalingrad. And we heard even from the German soldiers, with whom we were intermittently in contact, that they knew that the war had been lost, and that the end was inexorably coming closer. Again, the question whether we could make it through to see the end was really the issue, the major issue in our minds.

In August and September of 1944, the pressure of the Red Army on the Baltic countries increased, and the Germans were starting to plan the evacuation. Sometime that summer, we-- I was transferred from the workplace at the motorpool that I had described and where we lived, this workplace was closed. And all the Jewish workers from there were transferred to the concentration camp-- to the KZ Kaiserwald concentration camp, Kaiserwald.

At this time, the Germans were collecting work details for the so-called Sonderkommandos. These were work details whose task it was to dig up the remains of the murdered Jews who had earlier been murdered and buried in mass graves. They were dug up and burned to avoid any traces of these murders, to obliterate any traces of these murders.

We were aware that the selection for the Sonderkommando was a death, it was a certain death, because the people were chained together for these tasks and murdered as soon as they could no longer perform the job.

We were at constant-- at the KZ Kaiserwald until early or mid-September 1944, at which point we were evacuated by the ship to Danzig, and from there by a river barge to the concentration camp Stutthof. The travel by ship was quite bad.

We were crammed into the holes. We were not permitted on the deck of the ship. The stench was terrible and the amount of food that we got was minimal.

While the ship was bad, the trip by barge was even worse. We were confined again below decks in these small barges, very tightly packed. And when they gave us water, they used a hose to spray at us. In fact, the trip by barge seemed to be much like a cattle car to the extermination place.

However, we arrived in Stutthof sometime in mid-September of 1944, and spent there about three weeks. My impressions of Stutthof, where we did not work, but rather, spent endless hours at the Appell, at the roll calls. We started the Appell in the morning, at maybe 4:30 or 5 o'clock in the morning.

And the main impression of Stutthof that I remember was that it was dark. Most of the time it was dark. And that we were standing in endless roll calls, counting and counting and counting the people.

They counted them in the morning. Then there was some time when you were not-- during the day you were not permitted back into the barracks, but you had to stand outside. There was a way in which everybody huddled together very tightly to provide some warmth.

And one also saw the emaciated people, who were close to death. They were called Muselmann, actually, literally "Muslims." But these were people who were completely emaciated and showing a total lack of affect or emotion or interest. They were just like walking dead.

The other impression I carry from Stutthof was that at one point we were called to a big roll call. Everybody was called together for a public execution. They hanged, I believe, two or three people. I don't remember what the purported crime of them was. Probably mostly that they existed.

After Stutthof, we were taken as a fairly large group, mostly of the people from Riga, to a camp at Polte, Magdeburg. The Polte was a factory at the outskirts of Magdeburg, and slightly west of Berlin, maybe 60 or 80 kilometer west of Berlin. This was a war factory that was drawing about inch artillery shell casings.

We were working here in the factory on 12-hour shifts, one week during the day shift from 6:00 in the morning till 6:00 at night, and the following week, the night shift, from 6:00 at night till 6:00 in the morning. We worked six days a week on these shifts.

The food was rather poor. There was very little additional food to be gotten-- very little, if any. And the German workmen were generally not sympathetic. They insisted that we work very hard and very well, and would not countenance any tiredness or relaxation on the job.

There were some particularly vicious workmen among them. But most of them just insisted that the job be done. Well, which was certainly not anything that we were interested in doing.

The factory operation came to a fairly abrupt halt by February of 1945 as a result of the bombing by the Allies of Magdeburg. It was a pleasure to listen to. We didn't even go into the bomb shelters, but rather stayed in our barracks, and were happy to know that the factory was partially bombed out. But more importantly, the power stations of Magdeburg was completely destroyed. And after that, there really was no continuous operation at the factory to speak of.

In early April of 1945, the Allies had a breakthrough toward Magdeburg. And on April 10, 1945 our guards escaped, leaving the camp open. Together with four other friends, we immediately took the opportunity to leave the camp, rather than wait for the guards or for the Allies to come into town. We hid in the basements of bombed-out buildings. And we had to hide there for four weeks before liberation.

The Allied offensive on that day, on the April 10th, stopped short of taking Magdeburg. And after our escape from the camp, I understand that the guards returned, and in fact marched the remaining inmates from this Polte camp to some

other camps, as it was usual at that time. They tried to get them into-- away from the Allies into other camps.

We, in the meantime, had escaped, and were hiding in the city. We survived by eating whatever foods we found in these basements. These basements had in general were hoards. They were burned out, and in some cases we found potatoes that were half cooked during the fire in these things, in these buildings. We also found various types of preserves that we would eat.

And we hid through May 9, 1945, where, at that time, we were hiding on a little island in the Elbe River. We had gotten across the bridge, but then after us, the bridge was destroyed by Allied attacks, and we were hiding in a small house on this island on May 9. That was the day after VE Day. It was a strange calm. And in fact, we were liberated by the Red Army.

I should relate that at that time, I had contracted something like dysentery. And I was in a rather weak position, so that I got-- I was taken to a Red Army hospital and spent two or three days-- two or three weeks getting at least some of my strength back. At that time, the Red-- the Russians wanted to resettle us back, by sending us back to Riga. And since we were quite-- I was quite sure that I had no relatives left in Riga-- I did have some relatives in the West, in America-- I was not at all interested in going back to Riga.

And I, on some pretense or other, I escaped from this Russian camp now where I was, and went to West Berlin, where I registered as a refugee, and was taken through the displaced persons camps to Frankfurt, to Zeilsheim, near Frankfurt, where I then contacted my uncle in the United States. And I was, within a year and a half, able to come to the United States where I started a new life.

In retrospect, I should say that I believe that my survival really was a very improbable event. It was a chance event. While at all times, I was very determined to survive, I really don't think that this was the major factor in my survival.

It is quite true that the people who were depressed, and were not anxious to survive, did not survive. But the contrary, just the drive for survival, was certainly not a sufficient-- have a sufficient importance. And the chance, I think, had a much greater effect than the desire to survive.

The other thing that I want to emphasize was the continual dehumanization that we experienced right from the beginning, when the Germans came in. It started slowly, with the wearing of stars, with the prohibition against walking on the sidewalks, with the not using the trolley cars. Then, with a move into the ghetto, and continually, so that we were kind of conditioned to almost accept as the norm the horrendous behavior, the horrendous killings, the horrendous treatment of us by the Germans. And this was the dehumanization, when you practically began to think of yourself as some kind of a not human.

While we certainly always thought of ourselves as superior to the Germans, yet, in another sense, we also did think of the treatment-- we kind of accepted the treatment. Not really. "Accepted" is the wrong word. But we found the treatment almost as the norm, that the treatment of the-- that we found at the hands of the Germans. And I think that was a large effect of this insidious and continual dehumanization that we experienced.

The behavior of the Russians toward the Jews, of the Soviets toward the Jews when they were in Latvia, was very poor. And in fact, as is well known, the Russians are not known for their humanitarian behavior. It is a-- we used to say in the camps, we'd rather be with the Russians than with the Germans. They will kill us not for being Jews, but possibly for being bourgeois. But you ran a better chance. But nonetheless, the mistreatment by the Russians had sort of conditioned us against escaping to the Soviet Union, and in that sense had contributed to the large casualties and the large killings of the Jews that the Germans did.

After the war, I was, for some years, almost totally preoccupied with establishing a new life, establishing a new career, raising a family in the United States. It was only almost a generation, later when my position here was more or less established, that I could look back on the war years, and think more in terms of its effects on me, and how I felt now about it.

From the perspective of the United States democracy, the treatment of the Jews in Latvia before the war, and in the Soviet Union, was horrendous, to say nothing, of course, about the treatment of the Jews by the Nazis. I feel that I have an obligation toward the dead to bear witness to these events, and to try to assure the continuation of the Jewish tradition, to assure the survival of the Jewish people in spite of the terrible Holocaust that has befallen our people.