

Is it rolling?

Rolling, one, two, three. This is Dan Tilles on June the 3rd, 1981, interviewing Albert Tilles. First question is can you describe those who comprised your household before the war?

I was living with my parents-- my father and my mother. Besides not the household, my brother was in Palestine that time. My twin sister was living in other city in Poland.

What was your family's social status, level of religious observation, level of cultural observation, educational background, relationship to non-Jews, assimilation?

It's a very long question. Let's start in--

Social status?

--with the social status. And immediately before the war, I actually supported my parents. My father used to have something which can be considered a tavern quite a few years prior to the war. But it's gradually deteriorated. And they have forced to close it. And after that, he tried to open a small grocery in the suburban part of Kraków. But also after about a year or so, he was forced to close it.

And being an elderly man not in the best of health, with diabetes, and atherosclerotic heart disease, he was unable to provide for the family. And therefore, for the last few years prior to the war, I was the one who was providing for the family needs. We used to live in a relatively new apartment in a walk-up, but relatively modern.

The way of my support the family were as follows-- first of all, I was one of the few, or maybe only one Jewish student who received the state stipendium fellow scholarship from the medical school I attended. Besides, I was working as a kind of secretary in the office of a Zionist organization in Kraków. That was in addition to me studying medicine in Kraków Medical School.

And as far as religious involvement was concerned, my father, later in life, became more religious. But our observation was most limited-- in the last few years, mostly to attending the services during the High Holidays. And the house was not kosher.

And we was further assimilated. For instance, my parents never knew and never spoke Jewish. They knew and spoke German. They were born during the Austrian regime. The family-- my father's, personally, was considered one of the more assimilated in the level of the population in Kraków.

What was their relationship to non-Jews?

There was very few contact lately between my father and not Jewish population and so few neighbors. As far as I'm concerned, I am exposed to relationship to non-Jews because of first fact that I attended Polish medical school in Polish university, about which if you want to we can talk in length later on.

Secondly, because of my political activity as a Zionist, I was exposed to officials of the Polish government. And that was-- and very little social life was considered completely. And socially, I was almost no contact with non-Jews.

What about the educational background of your parents?

I am not too clear about the educational background of my parents, that they were-- as far as I remember, they didn't have any formal education beyond grammar school. But both of them, besides speaking fluently Polish, they spoke German. My mother used to read quite a bit of books beside the daily newspaper.

What was the level of cultural observation? You lived in a large city.

Yes. I lived in large cities. I attended the theater and concert in the city. And that's as far as I could afford them. And as far as my father was concerned, he used to play flute. But later on, he didn't play anymore. Many years prior the war, my mother was attending concerts and theater. But before the war, because of economical and financial circumstances, the cultural activities were very limited.

Did you encounter any antisemitic experiences before the war?

Yes, I did encounter plenty of it. As I mentioned before, I attended the high school, what was called gymnasium in Poland. In a class of 30-some of my students, it was two or three Jewish students and then experienced some degree of antisemitisms from the colleagues, especially-- mostly from the teaching staff.

Then after trying four times, finally, I was able to be admitted to the medical faculty of the University of Kraków Jagiellonian University, the oldest and most prestigious university in Poland. And about these experiences as a medical student there, I will spend hours talking to you about. I don't know if you are interested.

Experience, to put it very shortly-- first of all, it was awkward at the beginning when I was admitted to the medical school, was called numerus clausus. It means that only a certain percentage of students was admitted to the Jew-- as Jews. And that it said it-- not exactly English-- numerus clausus, it meant that from 120 student admitted to first-year medical school, only five was in Jewish religion.

And second episode during the studies-- in a faculty, medical faculty, they ordered that Jewish student can work only on Jewish bodies during the anatomical study. And that forced medical students to try to make effort to enter the body of the Jews who were delivered to prosector.

And second problem we had the medical school in-- when I was a first-year student, we all belonged to one general organization of medical students of the university. But then-- and the general organization throw all the Jewish student out of there. And this organization was very rich organization, supplying books, and help, and money to the students.

After a very long fight, finally, we received permission and organized our own Jewish organization of medical student. And finally, when I was almost on the last-- the fourth year of medical school, which was not the last year. In the medical school in Poland goes at five and one third of the year.

And the so-called numerus nullus was introduced. In other words, from this year on, no medical students were admitted to medical school. Besides, we were exposed to antisemitic episode during the courses. And we were ordered to sit in so-called ghetto in the auditorium in the university. We refused to do it. And we are standing there in the lecture.

Also, during this stay in the university, frequently, we were exposed to violent acts-- beating, throwing out of the auditorium, kicking, and this type of behavior from inside of our medical so-called colleagues. We were also exposed to antisemitism from the part of the teaching faculty professors, which explains the antisemitic feeling very freely.

I also was exposed to antisemitic situation. And I was witnessing the gradual deterioration of financial economical situation of my family and the Jews in general. And I think that four or five years before the war, one of the prime minister of Poland used this expression, economical warfare against Jews-- OK, but no violence.

That was the attitude of the Jewish government-- Polish government and Polish population even before the war. And in certain respect, this antisemitisms in social and private life in contact with non-Jewish population, it was even more extreme at that time than it was in Germany.

As the prospects of the war became imminent, what options were open to you and your family? And what was involved in the decision-making?

The prospective of war was evident. But again, there's a denial of the population that something like that

can happen. And even during the last few days prior to the war, when we already had to cover the windows and close the lights at night, we still believed that all this is a power play from the German.

And the concession offered by Polish government in last two, three days prior the beginning of the war, would actually work. And a complete capitulation to German request of a-- consider as an ultimatum. Was still hope that war will not start, and some kind of concession instead may take place. We saw that a similar situation occurred when the German occupied Austria and then occupied part of Czechoslovakia and the rest of the Czechoslovakia. Somehow, they were able to accomplish whatever they wanted without war.

And we were hoping that this, then, somehow, an accommodation will be find out with Germany and no war will start. As far as the option is concerned, we didn't have actually any option. We didn't have any money. We didn't have any possibility to run, or to emigrate, or to run any place that will require a large amount of money, which we didn't have.

How old were you when the war broke out?

I was 29 years old.

And how did the first word of the war reach you?

The windows of our apartment were facing in the distance in the military airport in Kraków. And about 2 o'clock-- at about 6 o'clock in the morning, we heard a bomb explosion. We ran to the windows. And we saw then the airplanes that were parked on the airport near Kraków or bombed. And we saw for the first time the Germans took us in action.

How did your family respond to that?

The response of my certain family was to wait till the development in situation. And my job stop, didn't exist anymore because it was a work in political organization, which was automatically became illegal. And we-- it was complete confusion. The so-called Polish radio didn't supply us with any information. We didn't know what to do.

And I was a reserve officer of the Polish Army. And I have standing orders. In case of the war, I have to report to certain units. But before I even contemplate to report to my unit, the radio urge all the military personnel and reserve personnel of the Polish Army to leave the city and walk toward the next city, which was Tarnów, approximately 200 miles away.

So I left whatever I have to my parents and some supply of food left. And then with a group of my friends from the Zionist organization and academic organization in which I was also quite active, I think was on September 3 when we left Kraków. And we start walking east.

This was how long after the war broke out?

Three days.

And what are your first memories of the war?

First memory of the war is bombing, and the black smoke rising from the airport, and then and the complete confusion, complete dissolution of any authority, and the inability to get any information, to have any direction from any official source on what to do, how to behave, and so on. But among the Jewish population, in these first few days, more and more was inclined to say with the memories of what the German did to their own population, memory of the Jews were forcibly thrown over the border of Germany into Poland, for which we carried in a few months prior to the beginning of the war. And the tendency was to try to run away from the war and away from the Germans. And therefore, I made this decision and packed a few things myself and start walking east.

What happened after that, after you started walking east?

Well, I walked east there. And finally, I reached this next town in which I was supposed to report to my unit. And then I find out the order is to go in northeast, this time to report to the other place. And I was there walking. Fortunately, it was a beautiful September days. There was no rain in the beginning. Most of the time, we walked.

And the roads were full of flying people like myself. From time to time, German airplanes and were attacking these fire-- people walking on the street, and riding in the horse carriages, and so on. And occasionally, I was able to get in some horse carriage and go a few miles instead of walking. During the night, we tried to rest. And all we walked through in-- and in rest, we were sleeping in some farms.

As far as the food is concerned, we had some small amount of money as we took. And we were able to buy some food from the peasants on the way. Sometimes, we are even digging in some of the farms were already empty. And we were able to secure some potatoes from the field. And somehow, we managed to survive.

I am using this word because I was walking with a group of friends of ours. But during these air attacks on us, gradually, we lost each other in trees. And everybody was running to hide from the bullets. And then we saw the first effect of this-- people killed and wounded, laying on the road and other people-- men, women, and children-- running away into the-- away from the roads. It was when men were attacked during these attacks.

One of the dramatic situation was when we arrived to a bridge, which was over one of the river, which was emptying to the main Polish river Vistula. The name of the river was San. And the village was burning. And the German was very near. And the bridge was under the attack by the German artillery and tanks.

And we have the option then or to stay or to risk and run through the bridge, a wooden bridge, which was partially burned already. I decided to take a risk and run over the bridge. I was able to pass the river. And shortly after that, the bridge went up in flames.

In some of the villages were Jewish communities, which were usually panic-stricken. But some of them didn't want to move. They say, we survived the First World War. And the Second World War, can-- will probably be similar. It will pass. And we stay, especially there were villages in Poland, which were almost 100% Jewish. And was impossible to convince the elders of these communities that waiting for German is no option to be taken. They stay.

We moved further east, further east. Finally, after approximately 17 days walking and riding using a different means of transportation, I find myself few miles from the Polish-Russian border. And shortly after that, the Russian Army crossed the Polish border and occupied the eastern part of Poland. What happened after?

Then what happened?

In that time, I was together with some members of my not immediate family, but with my uncle, and his wife, and his son, who was also a medical student in Kraków. But they were living in this time in Lublin. And he was a sergeant in the Polish Army. And after the Russian Soviet Army occupied our-- this village where we were, when the war actually ended, in spite of the sporadic resistance of Polish troops in some of the towns, like Warsaw and Gdynia, for all practical purposes, the war ended.

And we decided to go to Lwów, which was occupied by the Soviet Union. It was called liberated Ukraine. And after a few days waiting, the train started to move around. And we were able through the windows get into the train.

And after, I think, three or four days traveling from this place in the village, not far from the Soviet Union border, we went to Lwów. One reason for that was that it was-- I wanted to finish my medical education.

And what was the situation? The medical school in Poland lasted five and one third year. And I finished medical school in winter 1938. After that, I started to take the final examination, which were-- and I took

few of them during the spring season of 1939. And the rest of my final examination was scheduled for September and October 1939.

But that time was the war already in progress. And I was left with no documents proving my medical education and without finishing the education. I hoped that by getting to Lwów, I would be able to get some information how I can get this-- a possibility or to take the examinations, or to get some documents from Kraków, or maybe to go back to Kraków. We didn't know what to do then. So after the relatively long trip, we went to Lwów, which was under Russian occupation.

Yeah, go ahead.

In Lwów, in the beginning, I was together with the family I described before. But then because of difficult financial difficulties and an inability to support themselves, I decided that I should go on my own and stay separately from them. I was interested in getting my document from Kraków and tried to get information what happened to my parents, what happened to my future-- [AUDIO OUT]

Already at that time, the people started to come from Kraków to Lwów running away from German. And from these people, I was able to get information that somehow, my parents are managing. And my future wife was making preparations to join me in Lwów. From the other part, I tried to get some documents from the Kraków University.

And again, through these people, I get in touch with some of my friends from the university and from the medical school who were left, who didn't leave the Kraków. And they promised to get me the so-called absolutorium statement from the university that I finished my medical studies and the result of the examination I already took.

Unfortunately, before they were able to secure this information, the university was closed by the German. And there was no-- the professor were arrested and imprisoned. And there was no possibility to get any information from the Kraków University. I went to medical school in Lwów.

And after a long, trying, and long discussion, finally, I received permission to repeat all my examination, from the first to the last, from the chemistry, physics, anatomy, and physiology, and to the all clinical examinations on the base of the affidavit that was signed by friends of and colleagues of mine who attended the university-- to the Jagiellonian University together with me. And that was my next step I had to prepare for examination.

And in relatively short time, I was able to pass again this examination, so much so that in December 1940, when it is approximately one year after I arrived in Lwów, I received a diploma of a physician from the Medical Institute organized within the University of Lwów.

So your wife-- your future wife joined you already at this point?

At this point, my future wife joined me already.

So what happened after that now you were both in Lwów? What happened after that?

My future wife enrolled in the school and was studying in Russia. And I finally got a job. Even studying at this examination, I got a job in a tuberculosis department of the medical school in Lwów, which gave me a relatively small amount of money. But also, then I was able to eat there and sometimes even to get some food to bring home.

What was the course of events after that?

The course of the-- in Soviet Union was in methods so on that new graduating doctor were assigned by the authorities to certain part in certain positions, regardless of their inclination, and the ability, and so on. And I was assigned to a small village not far from Lwów.

And because of my experience in tuberculosis and addition requirement of venereal skin disease, I was sent there to organize a tuberculosis sanatorium and tuberculosis dispensary and take care of tuberculosis patients from this village and surrounding country. In the meantime, my wife was finishing the studies in her nursing study. And our plan was then, after she finished, she moved to this small village. And we settled over there.

But in June 1941, the Soviet and the German war started. And the day when it started, I happened to be in Lwów because it happened on the weekend. And some of the weekend, I was able to come from this village not far from Lwów by train and to see my wife in Lwów. But as soon as the war started, I was unable to go back to the place of my work.

And again, we were faced with the situation what to do-- to run again through the very hostile Ukrainian population in the east who is deep into the new Russia? Or to wait in development of situation?

Again, the situation was quite chaotic. Two days after the start of the war, all the Soviet authorities left Lwów. By the third day, they came back, proclaiming they will fight. And they are winning. And they are going to repulse the German. And therefore, our option was or to run again or to stay and wait on development and the reasoning.

Five days after the beginning of the war, the German went and came to Lwów. And we went into Lwów for a few months again in working different places, trying to make enough money to secure some kind of support. Fortunately, we-- in that time, we were living not in the center of the city. But then the Germans started to form a ghetto, and it was visible and predictable that all the Jews were living like we were living, on the periphery, will be forced to go to ghetto.

And we were faced with situation or to go to ghetto among people which we didn't know almost anybody or to try to go back to ghetto in Kraków, where we had friends, family, and so on. And we decided to take the risk and secure ourselves some Polish documents. And my wife's brother paid some two Polish fellow to help us to go through it. And we took off our armbands with the Star of David. And we boarded a train at night.

And after a few hours, we find ourselves in the part of the Poland which was called now government government. And it was this part of Poland, which was occupied by German in 1939. From this small village, we were able to get in contact with our friends and family in ghetto Kraków.

And they were able to secure for us the identification card, so-called Kennkarte. And after we received this Kennkarte, again, without an armband and other signs of the fact that we are Jewish, we went to Kraków. And we were clandestinely into the ghetto.

Before then, did you have any thoughts of leaving Poland or even trying to go to Palestine?

Yes. Well, before the war or during the war?

During the war, right before you decided to come back to the ghetto.

No. At that time, it was too late to do anything. But in the beginning, in the winter of 1939, we were considering to go to Hungary. But again, that required a large amount of money, which we didn't have. So in spite of the fact that I have some contacts with the Ukrainian friends on the border of Poland and Hungary, we are unable to do it.

And after this winter, the border was so closely guarded that you couldn't even go near the border. You have to have a special pass to go within 50 miles of the border. And if not, you are arrested by Soviet facilities. Therefore, the idea was given up. In the beginning, people who have more money were able to somehow to go some other places-- to Vilna, to Hungary, to Romania. But we, because of lack of money, we were unable to do it. It's not as simple as that. But it's an abbreviation. So get now ghetto, right?

Right. Can you describe the ghetto, the formation of it, how it was set up, the administrators, the inhabitants, the lifestyle, the size, the work, the housing, food, medical attention, schooling, religious

practices, political activity, cultural activities, resistance, or smuggling? Just to give you a general outline of things.

It is again subject we can talk for an hour now. We were not present when the Kraków ghetto was organized. Therefore, I cannot answer these questions. Anyway, and as far as the geographic situation was concerned, surrounding by the wall is relatively small part of the quarter, the quarter behind the Vistula-- not even this part, which was considered historical Jewish ghetto in Kraków.

The ghetto was in a so-called self-governing with Judenrat and under supervision of SS. A majority of people are going out of ghetto with a special passage to going to work outside the ghetto. And religious practices were formed accordingly, again, in different Orthodox and less Orthodox.

The cultural-- there were no schools. There were no schools in ghetto as far as I know. There was some clandestine teaching of the children, but no organized school present.

As far as the medical facilities was concerned, was one Jewish hospital, in which I work partially, and the other hospital for infectious diseases. The facilities in the hospital were very poor. The amount of medication was very limited. And the care was excellent because the immense concentration of doctors and nurses from the entire Jewish community.

I was able to get work as a physician in the work camp a few miles from the ghetto. And I work over there, again, under guard of the German soldier in the morning, coming back to ghetto in the evening. And I also have so-called a little private practice, which usually was paid by some food and so on.

We were living in a apartment together with the family of my wife, which was one large room, which was family of my wife, another family, and we all together in one room. It was approximately 14 people sleeping on the floors, and so-called beds, and so on-- one kitchen for entire family. Another question you got?

Was there any resistance in the ghetto?

Yeah And as soon as I came to ghetto, because of my previous involvement in the Zionist organization, I was approached to join the underground organization. And my activity was relatively limited to taking care of the wounded which were brought to the ghetto because they couldn't go to the hospital.

The hospital only was where people who were on the service for Gestapo and who had reported this fact to them. So I and another female doctor were treating these wounded in private homes. And besides, later on, I was assigned. And I was able to secure a position as a deputy doctor in the prison within the ghetto.

And the purpose of it was to maintain contact with members of the underground who were arrested and who were in ghetto. But were not attempt in ghetto itself for an armed resistance. But the ghetto-- from the ghetto, member of the resistance were going out to perform act of resistance outside and in the ghetto. And also, this organization was one of the-- which was able to secure Polish identification cards.

And among them, I was able to secure an identification card for my wife, whose appearance were not that Jewish. And therefore, I was trying to convince her to go out of the ghetto. But she refused to do it in spite of the fact that she had a good identification card outside.

Was there any smuggling going on?

Yes. It was a constant smuggling going on. And you couldn't-- in the beginning, the condition in ghetto were relatively benign. It was not-- it was no enormous effect of beating or shooting within the ghetto itself. And frequently, the people from the ghetto were arrested, and took out, and very frequently never heard again.

And I was also once arrested. But because of the intervention of the chief medical officer of the prison, I was released before came in the morning. And therefore, was only within the Jewish Ordnungsdienst, which is police, Jewish police authority. And they released me.

This situation changed markedly in October 1942, when the first so-called Aussiedlung and transport were organized within ghetto. And the first transport went to the death camp in Belzec. Again, through this effort from this underground organization, we are able to arrange so that some people, Polish people, follow up the trains.

And after a few days, they came with information that the trains reached certain point in woods not far from Rava-Ruska, not far from Belzec. And after a few hours, they were coming back empty, with only clothes on it. The information brought to ghetto weren't-- the people who are taking this transfer are probably killed.

But the response of the-- that leadership and the ghetto population in ghetto was that it was impossible. They refused to believe it. And that was the reason that so few people could possibly have opportunity to leave the ghetto and try to save themselves outside the ghetto didn't do it.

I didn't have this option because I didn't have any money. And my personal appearance was such that I was easily recognized as a Jew. And therefore, I couldn't get any-- even the opportunity to hide outside the ghetto.

There were more than one transport like this during the existence of ghetto. After each transport, the ghetto was-- territory was smaller. The people were pushed together in the remaining part of the ghetto. Finally, on March 13, 1943, the ghetto was liquidated. The membership and the population of the ghetto was walked a few miles to concentration camp, which was not there. Was located in the neighborhood of Kraków. And people who were trying to hide and were staying in the ghetto were gradually discovered. And all of them were killed.

And I was in a concentration camp. Most of the inhabitants of the prisoners of the concentration camp were leaving every morning to go to different places to work for Germans. I was also part of the group who was sent to a factory. After this factory was liquidated, I was assigned to work within the concentration camp.

Part of the assignment was building houses and roads in-- anyway, I did not work as a physician. You have any questions? And that camp was sent independently. Was in different units my wife and my mother. In the ghetto, I was able to put-- correction, in the concentration camp, I was able to protect my mother, who because of her age, was exposed to almost weekly search for older people, who then were taken and killed.

Can you describe the living conditions there, the food?

We were living in large block with three tiers beds. And we were sleeping two or three on one bed. Every morning, we had to stand a long time to be counted in so-called Appellplatz. And the same situation was on-- during evening, after we return from work. If somebody was missing from the group which went to work-- frequently, rest of the group working with this person who ran away was taken to the execution place and killed, all of them, for this one-- only the one person.

What was the clothing like, the sanitary conditions, medical help, or anything like that?

OK. At that time, we still wore clothing-- our usual clothes. But the clothes were painted with stripes on the front and the back. And we have to openly wear an Jewish star on the left side on our underclothes.

What were the sanitary conditions like?

Sanitary conditions were big latrines near each block, which were used by most of the people. And it was crowd. And got quite a bit of lice present. And because the people were permitted to bring part of their belongings from the ghetto together with the belongings that they brought, also they bedbugs, which multiply within the camp and make especially sleeping very difficult in this condition. And therefore, there's-- and I don't remember a certain part of the room. Do you want me to?

Is there anything about the medical care?

There was one so-called block was a hospital. And it was a dispensary in which some Jewish doctor were in



for treating the sick patient. The hospital was not very crowded because people were afraid to go to the hospital. Because frequently, the patient were taken during the night, and disappeared, and were killed.

Why didn't you work as a physician?

Because there was apparently too many physicians at time in camp. And besides, apparently, I didn't have proper influence in among these certain Jews which were incorporating with German. And they were deciding who should have a better job within the camp, and other works.

Do you remember your first day in the camp and your reactions to it?

I don't remember exactly, but if you want to, I can describe to you a certain episode is stuck to-- in my mind, if you want to.

Sure.

Well, during the liquidation of ghetto and transfer of the population to concentration camp, the children were not permitted to go. And therefore, prior to liquidation ghetto, under German ordered all the children to be put in so-called children house. And some of the parents didn't trust German and kept the children at home.

And then when the order came to liquidate ghetto and transfer to the camp, somehow, they were able on their backs and other ways to clandestinely move the children into the concentration camp. Was in the concentration, the children were temporarily, later on, removed from the blocks. It was impossible to hide them anymore.

And they were put in near the hospital, a special children room. And I remember, one day, in-- was a special security precaution visible in the camp. We all were left to the Appellplatz, [INAUDIBLE] surround them that the Gestapo and the Ukrainian security police in black clothes. And then rumors spread that the children were being-- are taken away.

And two minutes later, could see the trucks moving upwards to get there. And that's when the children were taken and being taken-- put on the trucks. And the trucks were moved along all this population that came standing in the Appellplatz.

Going to switch sides.