

I'm Sidney Elsner. Today, January 14, 1985, we're interviewing Sylvia Malcmacher, a Holocaust survivor from Vilna, which is now in Lithuania, but in her time was in Poland. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. Sylvia, we'll start at the start. Tell us about your girlhood in Vilna, what kind of a city it was, what your family was like.

Well, I was born in Vilna. From my time, it was Poland in 1926. And I had an older sister, which was four years older, and a younger sister, which was seven years younger than myself, and my father and mother.

My father was a printer, a commercial printer. He worked at that place as long as I know, maybe for 25 years in that one place, since he was a little boy of 16. My mother wasn't working. She was just in the house and keeping house. We had a very happy home and very together home. Everybody was very devoted to each other.

I started school when I was six years old. School was very far. So we walked to school every day.

What type of a school was it?

It was a Jewish school. It was a school mostly everything was taught in Jewish, except Polish because we belonged to Poland. So we had to learn Polish and Polish history.

But it was not a religious school?

No, it wasn't--

It was secular school?

Right. It was taught Hebrew--

As a language?

As a language. But the rest of it was taught-- like arithmetic was taught in Jewish, Jewish history, Jewish writing and reading, and everything. The rest was taught-- was taught in Polish because we belonged to Poland. So I knew how to speak Polish and how to write Polish. But most of it was taught in Jewish. The school couldn't survive by itself because the government didn't help the school to survive. So each parent had to pay a certain amount for every child to help out.

Tell us what Vilna was like, how big a city it was, how big a Jewish population it had, what its whole population was.

Vilna was-- the whole population I really don't know. It must have been maybe a quarter million, more, or-- it was a big, big-- but the Jewish population was 80,000. And it was a very progressive town. It wasn't-- it was education going on a lot. And it was called the Yerushalayim D'Lite, like Yerushalayim from Lithuania.

Was it known for its synagogues? And for its yeshivas--

It was--

--its academies?

Yes. They had synagogues. Every second street were synagogues. Academies, Hebrew schools, Hebrew universities, theaters-- all the theaters from all over the world came to Vilna. And as a child, I really didn't miss one because my father was for it, for the arts. And whenever I knew theater came, a new artist came, he took us along to see it.

What about libraries and bookstores?

Libraries were a few really well known, really well known. And then every school had his own library. Bookstores, it

was a very Jewish-- geared to Jewishness. The whole town was geared to Jewishness.

The youth was a very intelligent youth, educated. They belonged-- every young child belonged to an organization, lot of like the Zionist organizations, Betar. And as soon as you went to school, every youth belonged to something. Every youth belonged to something.

As a child, I was always occupied with school and after school with activities. There was no television to watch. But we always found things to do-- spend time with the friends, ice skating, sled riding. After school, every time-- after homework, we always found things to do.

How did you and your family get along with friends and neighbors who were Jewish and who were non-Jewish?

Most of my family, most of my family's friends, my parents' friends were Jewish. They socialized with them. They went together. They got together and did things together.

We didn't have any non-Jewish friends what we really socialized, except the neighbors there where we lived. We said hello and that was it. But nothing more than this.

Did Jewish people live in one section of the city by themselves or were they all over the town?

No, they were all over, scattered all over. Every street had Jews and not Jews. I mean it wasn't like some Jews were piled up in one place. Where we lived, there was like half and half. There was a few streets that had more Jews populated. But that was just a few in town where there were a lot of synagogues and a lot of-- but the rest of the town were all scattered all over.

Was your family religious?

My father was more a modern person. He didn't wear no beard. But he knew everything from the Siddur and Chumash and whatever. He was a learned person.

In the house we kept a kosher home. And otherwise, he liked to go and more modern than-- he went to Temple every holiday and every Saturday. But in the house, we felt more modern than really that strong religious.

How old were you in 1939?

Well, as I said, I started school when I was six. In 1939, I was 13.

All right, now, let's talk about personally. How do you remember yourself in those days? That is from 6 to 13.

From 6 till 13, I didn't have a worry in the world. I was running after my sister all the time. Wherever she went, I wanted to join her. She was older than me. So she had older friends. And I remember she always beat me up when I was chasing after her because she wanted already to go out with some boys. And I was running after her.

The house was always happy, always with books to read, newspapers to read. The mother-- my mother was always home for us. When we came home from school, there was always supper ready.

And we got by very well. I wouldn't say that we had the luxury what the kids have now, like cars by the door and all the telephones or all the other things. But we-- televisions-- but--

They weren't invented. [LAUGHS]

No, they weren't. But we always have things to do after school.

Did you have radios?

Radios, yes. Radios we had. Yes, radios we had. Lights we had. Those kind of luxury we had.

Were you aware of any antisemitic attitudes?

Not when I was small, when I was really young. But by the time I was 10 or 11, I kind of felt it already because then it was like in 1936, '37. It started already with boycotts, like some Gentile stood in front of the Jewish stores and didn't allow customers to go in, like Jews has this place. Then it started.

The Polish government do anything about it?

Well, not-- it didn't go on that much. The Polish government-- we had then, I think-- yeah, who-- I can't remember who was the president then. He was not bad to the Jews. He put his foot down. But as the war started and it came closer to '38 and in Germany already went on the Holocaust, then it got real bad.

Sylvia, you talked about the youths belonging--

Yeah.

--to different organizations--

Yeah.

--Zionist--

Yes.

--militants, like Betar and others--

Right.

--were there any plans to fight antisemitism?

I really can't tell you that.

You were too young.

I was too young. And I really didn't know anything about it because I was too young.

We're up to 1939. Hitler and Stalin, Germany and Russia made a pact that divided Poland. And each country, Russia and Germany, took part of Poland.

Right.

Where was Latvia at this point?

Well, when--

I don't mean Latvia. I mean--

Vilna.

Vilna. Sorry.

Vilna at that point belonged to the Russians. Up till '39, we had Poland, like it was. And then when the Nazis took over Poland--

Well, hold on a minute.

Yes.

Tell us first about what life was like when it changed from Polish administration to Russian administration, what differences there were for you in particular and your Jewish friends.

Yes. When the Russians came in 1939-- it was in September of 1939-- it changed a lot. What way it changed? First of all, the people got very panicky right away. For food, we had to stand in line. We got like rations. How you say it? Cards? To get food.

Where my father worked for that long of time, his place got-- the boss was sent away. And his place-- from there, he had to go to a place where a lot of people worked. And it was like for the government. It wasn't like for a boss or for yourself. Commune, it was like a commune thing. And the pay was just-- it was smaller the pay than he got when he worked for himself because everybody got the same amount.

But the youth didn't feel it so badly because the Soviets for the youth did everything. When I finished in '39 public school, I was 13 then. And I was a good student. I wanted to go further for my education.

I couldn't have done it because, first of all, for a Jewish child to go like in a further education, like high school, when it was under Poland, it was very hard to get in. And it cost a lot of money. So I really couldn't do it. When the Russians came school was free. Education was free for all. So that--

Including high school?

Including high school, yes. As long as you want to learn, you could go. So then it was my chance to go further with my education. The youth had everything. They gave them-- and then, the youth didn't feel that much of a strength. But the parents and the older people felt that it's a different situation. But as I say, I was 13, and I really didn't feel that much a strength.

I wanted to ask you, what was your family name?

My family name was Distel-- D-I-S-T-E-L. That's how it's spelled.

Now how long between the Russian occupation and the German invasion?

The Russian came in 1939.

September.

September. And then it changed hands. Vilna changed hands a few times. In October, the Russians gave back Vilna to Lithuania because Lithuania was a long time ago the boss over Vilna. So when the Lithuanians came in in 1939, in October, they took over. And as soon as they came in, it was the first program of our Jews, the Lithuanians.

How bad a pogrom?

It went on for a few days. They robbed--

This is 1939--

1939--

--before the Germans, before the Nazis--

Before the Nazis when the Lithuanians came. They robbed. They killed. It went on like for three, four days. It was like a massacre. Lot of Jews were killed.

How about your family?

My family survived. But it was panic in the whole town. After three, four days, the Russian intervened, and it stopped.

But Vilna was still under Lithuanian from 19--

October '39.

From October '39 till '40-- till--

Till the Germans came?

Till the-- no, the Russian took over again. Till 1941. I think I have it correct. I marked it down. I'm not sure. I think I have it correct. Yeah, the Lithuanian came in October '39. And they stayed there till June 1940.

'40.

1940. And in 1940, the Russians told the Lithuanians, you can't take care of on the town. You're not doing a good job. You can't do it. So in 1940, the Russians came back to Vilna.

All the time when the Lithuanians were there, it was like under the leadership from the Russians. The Russians had-- the Soviets had an eye on it. But they did everything, the Lithuanians. But in 1940, they chased out the Lithuanians, and they took over again.

Did they take over all of Lithuania and the Baltic States?

I think so. I think so. Vilna, Kaunas, yeah, I think so. But I know from Vilna, that the Russians came back in 1940, which to us, it didn't make that much a difference because it was really the same--

Did the schooling, the ability to go to high school, gymnasium--

Yes.

--change when the Lithuanians took over from the Russians?

No. No-- yes, yes. In the 1940, when the Russians came, I resumed my education.

So the Lithuanians would not let you go?

No. No. In 1940, I resumed. And I went for one year back like it has-- it was like a gymnasium. And then I resumed my education from 1940 till 1941, just for one year I resumed my education.

What do you remember about the beginning then of World War II? First, we're talking about the period from 1939 when Hitler attacked Poland and was in turn-- I can't say attacked-- but England and France went to war with Germany. In that period, was there any commotion around Vilna?

Yes. Well, in 1939, when Germany took over Poland, the Russians came to us. And then it started between the Jewish people talk that Hitler is in Poland, and that people are killed, and that they take people to concentration camps. We

heard it. I mean as a child, I remember hearing about it.

But the people didn't really believe it. So they-- by us, life went on like it goes on. A lot of people came from Poland to our town. They ran away and like Berzniki, as they called it then. They came to Vilna from Poland, from Russia, from all the towns.

And Vilna put up like homes for them, kitchens to feed them. And they thought-- everybody thought that this is going to be a safe place. Nobody thought that after a few years, we're going to have the same thing. So thousands of Jewish people came from Poland to Vilna.

It felt safer under the Russians?

Oh, sure, sure. They came, and they started to work. It wasn't easy for them because when you leave your own home, you come-- I mean it wasn't easy for them. They didn't have that much place where to live. But they put up some homes for them and kitchens to feed them. And it was safer than by the Germans.

And now the surprise attack by Germany on Russia started June 21, 1941.

Right.

Let's say from the beginning of June 1941, can you remember any anticipation of an attack, any fear of it that the Germans were coming? No.

Any rumors?

No.

Any big exercises by the Russians?

No. As I say, I went to school. And it was the end of the school year. This I remember. It was the end of the school year. And we prepared, like here they make a graduation. I had to prepare a whole essay on a writer. I prepared it. All the children were excited about the graduation.

We had our evening set up. All the children had to wear white blouses and navy skirts. And we went through a lot to preparing it. But we never had this because the Germans came in.

And looking back, what happened to your family when the Nazis entered Vilna? And approximately how many days after the invasion were they there?

They came in in Vilna the 1st of May--

No, the invasion was in June.

In June?

Maybe the 1st of July.

July, could-- yeah, they came in-- right, maybe I was-- in July, right, they came in the 1st of July to Vilna. We--

What happened?

--didn't know nothing. We just heard airplanes and bombarding, a lot of bombardings. And we were relieved, across from us was the Jewish hospital. And the sirens went on all night and day. They brought people from the hospitals.

We lived-- our home wasn't bombarded. And then people started to say that the Germans are coming in. And after the whole night of bombarding, we woke up and we went outside. And then German tanks were all over the town. Like we went outside and there was a main street where we lived. So we walked outside and German tanks.

Were any of the Gentile population welcoming the Germans? Were they figuring they were liberated from the Soviets?

Well, the Gentile population, sure, they were not upset over it. They were not upset because they thought that Messiah is coming to them. But the Jews knew right away what is going to come out of the whole thing.

What were the changes in your family's life?

Well, my father didn't go to work because that place was already taking away. School already stopped. We're still all together. By then, when the Germans came in '41, we still were a family. Me and my sister and my younger sister, we all still were a family. We stayed in the same house where we lived.

But it's started already, like my father didn't go to his work. But the Germans send out the men right away to work for them in that city. He was-- he was the lucky one that he came back from work.

But other men weren't lucky because as soon they went out from work, they grabbed whole bunches of people. And they never came back. My father had a brother, and he went to work and he never came back.

But the people didn't know that they were sent to death. It was like they told us that they send them out to work someplace else, like out of town. But then people started-- some ran away and started to come back and told that it wasn't any place for work, that they send them right away to death. In Vilna was a forest, Ponary. And there where they send them.

My father was lucky. He went out to work, and he came back.

Were these the death squads the Germans were using, the Einsatzgruppen?

That was the leaders from Germany what took over Vilna. And they were-- and the Poles didn't help either, the Gentiles. Some Gentiles hid. But the Gentiles, if they knew somebody, they showed and--

They showed the Germans?

They showed the Germans. And they got paid for it, like 10 zlotys for a head or something. So the Germans really didn't--

So nobody helped you?

Nobody helped. Nobody helped. But--

Were you relocated?

We were in that sense lucky too up till a point. When the Germans came in '41, it took them just a few months. And then the ghettos started to-- they started up with making ghettos for the people.

Where we lived, in that section, the ghetto was built. So we stayed in the ghetto. But the people from every place else came to us in the ghetto. The ghetto was just a few streets. And the whole population--

The 80,000.

The 80,000 from the ghetto was-- in September, the 6th, 1941, was the ghetto made. So the whole population, the 80,000 people had to cram in in those few streets. They made two ghettos in two sections of town. We were lucky to

stay in the ghetto, as I said.

So the people from all over the town came to the ghetto. But they couldn't cram in so many people in that few streets. So a lot of people didn't make it to the ghetto. They send them right away to Ponary, to that place. Where we lived in our place, there were maybe 10 couples with children.

In your house?

In my house. People came, strange people family, whoever came, stayed in our place. So we were in the ghetto. That was the one lucky thing that we stayed in the ghetto. And the people who came, they couldn't take any belongings with them, whatever they had on their back. They left everything behind them.

Did these people just come and knock on your door or were they assigned to you?

I guess they just came. They came to the ghetto. And everybody who stayed in the ghetto had to take in-- had to take in those people. And as I said, they came with whatever they could put on their backs. It was very hot. And people dressed in 10 coats and in dresses because just whatever they could grab and pack up in a little bag. And that the way they came to the ghettos.

What was your life like in the ghetto as the war progressed?

My personally?

You personally.

Me personally, life was horrible because, first of all, you didn't have no food. They gave you like portions, a portion of this, a portion of that. You had to go and get the food.

And when the ghetto started, the people started to think already then that's it. It's not going to get any better. And they started to believe what the people who came from Poland told us.

Work stopped except for my father. As I say, when he went out, whatever hard labor he had to do. And education stopped. And it got a lot of sickness in the ghetto because it was so crowded. And life was horrible.

When were you able to leave the ghetto? Did you go to work?

Not in the ghetto. Not in the ghetto. I was 15 then in '41. With us it was a little bit different, with me personally.

My older sister, when she finished public school, she went to learn a trade. And she took up with being a furrier. So after a while being in ghetto, like I guess for a year, the Germans pulled out all the furriers. And they set them up in a work place outside the ghetto to work the furs for the soldiers on the front.

So as my older sister was a furrier, she got to be lucky. And because of her, they took us out from the ghetto and put us in a big, like 2,000 people--

The whole family--

The whole place. Because of her, the whole family went. But I want to go before that to the ghetto.

When we were in the ghetto a few months, even the people who were there were too many people. It was people didn't have where to be and where to live. So the Germans started up with-- you had to have passes. Like the people who worked had a pass. It was a yellow pass, a blue pass. They made categories.

After a month or two, the ghetto was overflowing with people. So they made up like a selection. That was the first



selection. And the people who had the yellow passes had to report one morning by the gate from the ghetto.

We had a gate. We couldn't get out anytime we wanted. Even to work, when the men went, they couldn't just pick up and go. They had to go in whole groups and be watched by the Germans.

So that night, sirens went out all over the ghetto. And announcements were made that the people who had the yellow passes should report by the gate. Then a panic started in the ghetto. And everybody wanted to get that yellow passport because they thought maybe this way they'll be able to get out of the ghetto.

We didn't have the yellow passport. But as my sister, as I said, was the furrier and she was the one who could get that passport-- she really wasn't a real furrier. She was just teaching herself. She was like an apprentice. But because she was still young too, she was 19, she went and she got that yellow passport from the ghetto-- how you say it, committee.

The Judenrat?

The Judenrat, right. Because right away it got organized a Judenrat, right.

Which is the Jewish Council.

Right. Right. She got the passport. But if she got the passport, my family couldn't get out. So we took a big risk. My father took the passport in his hand. And there were so many people, so they didn't really look the name or the age--

Just the color?

Just the color. So in everyone who had that yellow passport could take out four people. If he was the head of the family and he had that passport, he could take out four people with him. And that's what we were. We were to-- I mean, the three sisters and my mother and he had the passport. So he hold the passport in his hand.

And my older sister was already 19. And you could take out kids just up till 16. Because when you were 16, you had to work yourself. So I remember this. She made herself two pigtails and put on a little dress like she should look younger because otherwise they wouldn't let her through.

And we went to the gate. We couldn't take anything out. And it was early in the morning. And my father had the passport in his hand. And we were behind him.

And when we went to the gate, the officer took the passport and looked at it. And then we thought, that's it, because it wasn't in his name. And he kind of counted us that we are four people. And we went through.

So then a lot of people went out of the ghetto. But the people who didn't have this stayed in the ghetto. And a lot of people hid. Like it was called a Malina. That means like a hiding place.

By us, in the house, the people who were left, we had a room, a door, and then we had a big, like a buffet here, like a big chest. So all the people crawled in in that room. And we pushed the buffet against that wall. So it was covered.

And then, when the Germans came to look, nobody was in there. And they were lucky that they didn't knock and look. But when they went in, nobody was there. So those people survived in that extra room, maybe 25 people. And that was like the selection.

So we went out with the yellow passes. The people who stayed in ghetto, after everybody left, the German SS came, the Wehrmacht or the SS, I don't know. And whoever they found, they liquidated.

Everybody?

They--

Anybody who was left?

Everybody who was found in the house. They went house by house. And then--

How many people do you think went out with yellow passes?

A few thousand. A few thousand.

And how many would be left?

Oh, thousands of people. But some hid.

Yeah, I mean--

Some hid.

--an estimate of how many thousands.

In the ghettos, about 10,000 I think left with the yellow passes. And I don't have any idea about thousands of people were then.

Maybe 50,000?

Maybe. Were taken out and-- to Ponary. That was the place.

All shot in the woods.

All shot. After the yellow passes, after a day, the whole day after that massacre, we came back to the ghetto.

Oh.

Yeah.

What dates would this have been?

The dates I have it I think. September-- in October, October, October 1941, that started with the passes.

But this Aktion of your going out to gates with the yellow passes--

Yes. Yes.

October '41--

October '41.

That quick?

Yes. In September-- in September, the ghetto was--

Organized.

--organized. And in October, it started with those passes because they had to get ready for so many people. And that was the way of doing it.

Your group of roughly 10,000--

Yeah.

--came back into the ghetto.

Came back in the ghetto.

And what? Set up housekeeping again?

Again, we went to our place where we lived.

You found the 25 people still hiding there--

We found them. We found the people hiding there. And in ghetto was like a Holocaust, because the people whom they found were all taking away whoever couldn't hide and whoever didn't have the passes. It was no reason.

Let's go off the course a minute. Tell us about the 25 or so people who were hiding. How many days were they in hiding? How did they get any food or water?

Well--

How did they get through it?

It was just one day-- I think one day operation. In the morning we left out of the ghetto. We slept-- I remember, we slept-- they took us someplace. And people slept on the floors. And then next day, I think we came back to the ghetto.

And then we came to our place. And we thank God that those people were in hiding. And then life started again.

To what extent, if any, did non-Jews help the Nazis persecute the Jews?

In what extent, let's say-- see, my older sister, I'm going to go back to her, because of her, I'm alive. She was a risky person. I was always afraid to move. And she was very devoted to the fact--

What was her name?

Rachel. Rachel. Rachel. She was older. And she was more risky than me. I was afraid.

So when we didn't get enough food or something-- we wore yellow stars. I didn't go into it. As soon the Germans came in, they put a yellow star. We had to wear it on our arms that we are Jews.

So she used to-- she looked a little bit like Gentile. She had like a little nose, you know. So when she went out, she used to go out between the Gentiles.

When she was on her way to the furriers?

Right. So she wore the star here. So she used to hide that yellow star and went out between the Gentiles and got some food and brought it home so we could survive.

But a lot of Gentiles-- that's what I miss answering you-- when they saw people with a yellow star, they went right away and they told the German-- the German committee that here is a Jew. And it didn't take long that they came and took him away. So that's--

They hunted them down one by one.

Yeah, one by one, that's the way it was.

Just because they were Jewish.

Right.

Were you aware of any non-Jews, any Gentiles, who helped to hide Jews or who smuggled food or goods that helped you survive?

I personally didn't come in contact. And my family didn't come in contact. But I heard-- I heard that-- I know my girlfriend, a close girlfriend from school. She was hidden out by a Gentile family.

The family was very close to them before the war. And when the war broke out she went, and she was there all through the war. I think she survived. And I heard that she's in Vilna. So I know of one fact that I know. I heard that people survived and hid out. But our family personally and none of my uncles, none of my aunts got that break.

Going back to the time of the German occupation, did many people go into the Russian zone? Did they try and get out before the Germans came?

Yes, that was very much so by us because when the Russians were and they left, they moved out from Vilna. And before the Germans came a lot of Jewish young men and women went along with the Russians. But a lot got killed on the way from the bombs, from the Germans when they came in. And--

The Germans were bombing the roads with refugees.

Bombing the roads. But a lot went in deep Russia. And they survived. By us, it was like nobody of-- my younger sister was very young. The only one, my older sister was a little bit older. And then we talked about it.

But the family was so close that we couldn't just pick up and leave our parents and run away. And the parents, they said, how can we leave? We have here our home. We have our things. It was just-- how can you just pick up and leave? Mostly young people left.

Sylvia, were going to take a pause now. And we'll be back.

OK.