

You'll open up over here.

Bob said if he, Mr. Reisman, holds them up, I think it wouldn't be too difficult.

How about just like--

I'm Judy Levendula. And today, I'm interviewing Mr. Isidor Reisman. I'd like to thank you for being here and sharing with us today. And to begin with, I want to ask you a little bit about-- well, the very present. Let me ask you, first of all, your age, if you would share that.

I was born 1920. I'm 64 now.

And where were you born?

In Bilka. That was Czechoslovakia at the time. It was Hungary before World War I. Then it was Czechoslovakia for 20 years. Hungary again for four years. And now, it's part of the Ukrainian USSR. It's called the Subcarpathian Mountains.

And where do you live now?

I live right now in Cleveland, in Mayfield Heights, Ohio.

Are you married?

Married with two children. And I work as a Hebrew teacher and also a consultant at the Instructional Materials Center at the Bureau of Jewish Education, where I create visual materials for teaching Bible, Jewish history, Israel, and Hebrew.

Good. Let me ask you about what your life was like just before the war, if you can start with the year 1939 and tell me what you remember about your situation then. Where you were and so forth.

Before 1939, we lived in the eastern part of Czechoslovakia of the Carpathians. And I could describe my life, our life, our community life as very idyllic, quiet mountainsides, with beautiful countryside. And we lived in a real democracy, which is often called the European America.

We had all the rights and privileges. Our Jewish community of over 1,000 people, we had some 200 families, 250 or so. And we organized our lives around our religion, around synagogue, around the rabbi, around the Hebrew schools.

And we started education rather early, at the age of 4, for boys mainly. And girls joined then later on, their own Hebrew schools. But we had, I would say, a quiet, normal, hopeful life until 1939 when troubles start.

Let me ask you a bit about the structure of your family. How many children were there? And what were they like?

We were a family of nine children. I was the oldest one. And we lived in very close quarters of two rooms, often sleeping two or three in one bed. But we were a happy family. When I was older, I was away from home in yeshiva, so there was a little more space. And we didn't struggle much as far as making a living. My father was a good provider.

What did he do?

He was really-- he had several trades. First of all, he learned his trade as a shoemaker from his father. But when he came to live closer to the center of the city, he went into producing like marmalade through the summer, as the seasonal job. And he produced at one time every summer two tons of marmalade to be shipped out to western Czechoslovakia.

And then he also learned to be a monument engraver and selling monuments. He learned this on his own. And in addition, he was the sexton of the congregation, of the large temple, synagogue, that is in the middle of our town. And

this was the major synagogue, seating about 300 men, and on the mezzanine, equal number of women or more.

So he was the actual caretaker of-- it was really more or less a mitzvah job because he got maybe a half a day's pay for a week. But this made him-- this is a picture of my father that I found after the war. I was given it by a friend, who had a picture and also some other materials that my father and mother gave him to hide until we return.

And, of course, she sent us this picture. It's the only picture I have of my father. And I have no other pictures of home at all. And I treasure it very much. I have copies made for my sisters in Israel. And later on, when I've written for the Jewish News, I have his picture of course also featured in it.

Otherwise, our life was considered without trouble because every one made a living, more or less. And we were happy with less. As far as housing or as far as food, we had enough to eat. And especially on the Shabbat, it was very beautiful, the way I describe it in my writings that I have written a book on my hometown, Bilka.

And this book was really a thesis on my master's degree at the college, Cleveland College of Jewish Studies. Instead of writing about medieval history, so I thought I'll write a book about the history of our hometown, which has a history of some 300 years from the beginning through the very end, when out of 1,130 Jewish souls, about a little over 100 remained, which is about 1 out of 10 survived.

What do you remember about the beginning of World War II? When were you first aware that there was a war?

We were first aware that war is in the making when Hitler came to power. And we used to hear all kinds of discrimination and bigotry and then laws against the Jews. But this was out in Germany. And we hoped that this will just pass.

But then, of course, the war came in. And we saw that it's going to other countries. And entire Europe was swept away under the Nazis. And finally, in 1939, when Hungary took over from the Czechoslovakians and from the Ukrainians, about six months of independence, and then we knew that it's coming closer. And Hungary became an ally of the Germany. And they started to institute anti-Jewish laws.

But they were not as severe as in Germany. They were only like a Jew has to have special permission to have a license to have a store, a grocery store or a haberdashery store. So you had to have extra permission. And they checked whether he paid-- whether he is already a native or a citizen for the past 100 years, for the second or third generation. And they always could say no. And they tried to limit Jewish activity as far as commerce and work, but not the shoemakers or tailors and cobblers and cabinetmakers and so on.

And as the war progressed, what happened to your family?

As the war progressed, in 1941, I was 21 at the time. And I was inducted into the army. But at that time, there was no more room for the Jew in the army. And they established work camps, paramilitary work camps in Hungary, throughout Hungary, for all the recruits. And I was together with some 400 recruits coming to Kassa, which is in Slovakia. At that time, it was already Hungary.

And we worked there. We learned basic training first. And instead of giving us weapons, they gave us a shovel to work in digging for a-- mostly, we worked for about two years we built a railroad in Transylvania. And we had to wear-- we had our military uniform for about 6 or 8 months. And we had to wear these yellow badges as a sign of a Jew.

And there were some in our unit that come from Budapest or from other parts of deep Hungary. And they wore white badges. The white badges were for those who converted to Christianity, but they were considered still Jews. And they thought that they would be more privileged, but they were not really. At times they were treated even worse because they said, we don't want Jews to be Christians.

How long were you in that work camp?

I was there from 1941 in October throughout 1945 in January when I was liberated in Budapest. I have been working in the railroad for close to two years. And then later on, which was very hard labor, we had to actually fill up many wheelbarrows of, I would say, by the hundreds a day and to break through or to cut through a mountain and then fill in a valley to build a railroad. And it was very hard labor.

And during the winter, it was very cold. And at times, we used to have food for lunch-- we got out at 5 o'clock to work. It took us about an hour and a half to walk there. And then it was so-- the winter was very harsh. That was in northern Transylvania. And we actually had to eat bread that was frozen or salami at times.

We had to figure out a way how to eat it. The next day we used to make crumbs out of the bread and chopped up the salami in squares. And it was frozen, but nevertheless we put it in our mouth. And it warmed up. That's how harsh the winter was.

After that period, they were looking for someone to go to Budapest, they said, to a unit of someone who knows mechanics for motors, motor mechanics. I was not a mechanic. And I did not volunteer because I always felt I'm not pushing myself. Whatever will be, I left it to my fate.

But they needed only 40. And then they needed 40 helpers assistants. And I was among the last two assistants to be called to be the assistants. And then we were for some-- over two years in Budapest. And we had a little more--

First of all, we were not taken to the front lines out in Ukraine, in Russia. And very few of them survived. I would say out of the 400, maybe 20 survived. And from our group of 80, we had a better survival rate.

But we were there in Budapest. And we had contact with a large Jewish community. We were able to go out every weekend. And we were able to go home every few months on a holiday. And things were made sort of more or less normal, like we would be in the army. It was really under the Hungarian army, paramilitary work for the army.

We used to do work for the units that brought back some old shot down airplanes, mostly from Allied forces. And we had to take them apart and then sort them out in baskets. And at once, I was asked to-- they asked for someone who knows how to do sign painting. And I heard that. I raised my hand. And I am not a sign painter, but my father taught me monument making.

And I thought to myself, I would rather make monuments instead of signs. But I was accepted to be a sign painter. And I knew how to draw letters. And I had to put on every supply box or basket-- they used to come in with an order, they need 10 signs for this and this size of screws or other materials or parts of the motors.

And I was working for close to two years inside-- not inside in an office, but at least in a hallway. And I had my table. And I did that kind of work. So this is until almost the very end, until 1944, when things got worse. So we had other assignments. But for most of the part, I survived because of that.

And you were considered in the military throughout this whole period?

It was-- well, I was considered in the military only for strictness and for punishment. If we would be AWOL, then you could be shot. Some of them were shot. They didn't come back to the unit or they were out. And for that, we were not for privileges. We didn't have-- only privileges we used to get is going home once in a few months, three, four months. We had a better chance to go, like the others were far away.

What did you know about the rest of your family during this time?

Well, during this time, since I was the oldest, I used to send letters often home. And I used to tell them I often visit synagogues and houses of study. And I came to the Jewish community. I told them I need a better coat because we had to exchange our uniforms after eight months into our own clothing.

And when the order came, we did not have our civilian clothing, and they did not care. We were stripped down to

actually our underwear. And for a few weeks, we had to walk around with our night covers over us because we had nothing else to wear. So after that, I went to the Jewish community. And we got some coats and warm clothing for the winter.

And then my package came from home. And I was able-- all we had to wear is a yellow badge again on our clothing as a sign of a Jew so we shouldn't escape, or we should be easier to identify. But often, when I used to go to Budapest, to the city, I used to take it off. And I took a chance, of course, because if I would be identified, if I would be asked for my ID, and I would have a good pass, but for that I could be either in jail for a few weeks or giving harsher treatment. But I had to take this chances because we were getting ready for a time when we'll have to live incognito or run away or do some underground work, which we did later on.

In a way, I used to keep contact with my family, very close, very often. But in 1944 when things got worse, and especially in the very beginning when Germany took over Hungary and they occupied the entire Hungarian region. And the Carpathian Mountains were about 50 kilometers, which is about 30 miles to the border-- and to the Russian front. So they made arrangements immediately that they'll have to evacuate the Carpathian region, which is actually the upper part of Hungary, which is right here close by to Poland.

The Polish border is right out here. And this is Hungary. And we try to maintain a low profile. But it did not help. They said that this area, the Carpathian Ruthenia called, had to be evacuated because we were too close to the borderline and to that place where the front might start.

In March and April, things were started quite bad. In March, I received a letter from my parents that they will be evacuated to Beregszasz, which is about 37 kilometer out of our hometown Bilka. And some 10,000 Jews were concentrated there in a makeshift camp, in a former brick factory.

And they asked me if I could come and visit. It would be fine since I did get offered visitation rights, or privileges. I came to my superior. And I told him my parents are being evacuated to resettled. At that time, this was the euphemism for it I would like to go and visit them.

So he said he'll give me a two-day pass. And he did give me a two-day pass. So I traveled from down-- several kilometers down Budapest to Beregszasz. And I came off in Beregszasz. And right near the railroad, there was this camp.

And this encampment, I came up. I showed my pass. I had a Hungarian military cap. I had my yellow badge. I came up with very good papers from the military that I'm here to visit my parents for 48 hours.

They let me in. The German guard didn't understand Hungarian. So the Hungarian explained what this is. He let me in.

And when I arrived there, I was like someone coming from America. They said, you look to us like you're coming from the freest country in the world, from America. Some others said, you look to us like you're coming from the Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel, like you really can come and go because we cannot come and go anymore.

As I arrived, I came-- look around for the barracks where my hometown people would be. There were several dozen barracks. And the barracks were just really plain huts without walls. And since this was a factory, a brick factory, there were many bricks there. So the people there build their walls, just walls high enough so the wind shouldn't blow in. And the people used to sleep on the floor.

But before I came to see this, I saw a man without a beard. And he looked a little bit like my father. But all Jews were ordered to cut off their beards because this was a sign of Jewishness and they don't want-- they have a sign, the yellow star. Everybody had to wear a yellow star, from children and adults, everyone, men, women, and children.

And my father saw me. He recognized me. I look the same. And he motioned to me. And I came up. And I see him without a beard. It was very traumatic to see him without a beard.

And he had some-- he was a maintenance man there because he was very handy. And he said, come on, we'll go to our barracks. And he says he's doing maintenance work.

And he picked up his basket. And under the maintenance things, there is a Bible. And he says, I don't work all the time. Whenever I have time, no one is around, I study the Bible. I study the Chumash. And I follow the weekly portions of our reading. I hope we'll go back home. We'll need the next book of Moses.

So I sighed. I said, I hope so too. And then we came to our barracks. And my eight little brothers and sisters down from 20 down to 2 and 1/2, 3 years old came out and my mother. And I came in.

And I saw they were on the ground. They had their covers. And they had their belongings. And they were all sleeping right there. This was their sleeping area.

And they were getting ready some food at that time for lunch, which they brought along. And luckily, it was-- luckily I say-- it was right after Passover. And they had a lot of matzah leftover. And this was easier to carry. And it wouldn't spoil as bread would spoil. So they had a lot of matzah.

And then I had my 90-year-old grandmother right there also. And some 15 families, totaling to almost 100 souls. And uncles and aunts and cousins were all there.

And soon the word spread that I'm there. Everybody came and shake hands. And whether they say in Budapest, what they say, the front is close. And they looked around no one should hear talking about the front line. I said, they're probably resettling you to work, and they need work in the farmlands. And they probably would go there, would take you there because they need farmhands desperately. Summer is here.

And so they all hoped this is the only thing because the war's end is really at hand. And they all wanted to know what-- in Budapest they must know. Maybe I can go and intervene. And they were desperate, but not panicky.

And everybody showed me around says, come see, this is all what's left of my house. That's all we have. And others were saying, we're here. We are really here. From here, we're going straight to Jerusalem. We're not going back home because this is the time of Messiah will come. And that's why we're all here. This is camouflage. This really will be and we'll all meet in Jerusalem, in Israel.

And everybody was hopeful. They had prayers said, evening and morning prayers. And I participate in these prayers. And I was very close, of course, to the entire community.

And they all wanted to hear if I can do something, if I can go and intervene someone should send a visa to America. They have friends in America. I should go to the American embassy. I told them there is no American embassy there. But there is someone who takes care of it. I'll find out. Everybody was hopeful that this is only a few weeks that they'll be there. And it turned out they were only a few weeks.

While I was there I encouraged them, and I said, the thing looked hopeful, although many Jews were treated horribly. But this looks like just a concentration camp of people who will be soon taken to farmlands because they need it. And that's the only thing I could say, I would want to say, and I would want to believe.

But soon, when I had to live, I was really very much taken by seeing this scene. And here, I have a picture that I took while I was going back to Budapest by train. So I have seen hundreds of kids standing out there with yellow stars. And I was just seeing puffing of the ominous smoke. You never thought of the smoke of Auschwitz at that time, and the covering their smoke and they were just waving.

And here, I made the pictures of all my brothers and sisters and others who are standing by, my little brother who was there, who was only a little over 2 and 1/2 years old. And they were just waving goodbye. And as they were waving goodbye, I was the only one crying there. And people looked around there. They knew why I was crying.

Tears filled my eyes when I saw them. They were just waving like little children, waving to the train. And every train, they were just saying goodbye to every train. They did not realize they are saying goodbye to the whole area.

Now, while I was there, before I left, my little brother came up to me. And he said he wants to go to Budapest. He wants to go to the big city because every time I used to come I did not even know him because he was born while I was in the camp already, in the work camp.

But my father came up to me. And he said to me, I look around at these mountains. And here, I'm reading, I lift my eyes to the mountains from where will help come? Not those mountains way out where the Russians are waiting and not moving. Help will not come from there. Help will come from God, creator of heaven and Earth.

This is how my father felt. And this is what he said to me. And he was reading from the Psalm prayer book, this Psalm of David. His name is David. It was David Aaron. And of course, our son is named after him.

And I was so hopeful that he feels that way, that God will help, and that help will come. And I told him that King David was saying this looking around the mountains of Jerusalem. We hope to see those mountains in Jerusalem. Sure enough, when I was in Jerusalem, every time I go-- so I'm saying this Psalm for him. And I always remember what he said. But those mountains were mountains in diaspora, in exile. So this is like a memorial for him.

My little brother, of course, he wanted to go so badly too. I always used to tell him, I take him to a big city because he knew he has a brother in Budapest. It was a big thing. My sisters used to tell him I'm coming. I'll bring him something. And I'll take him along. He said he wants to go now with me.

But, of course, he said to me that he knows what to say when he's in danger. So look at him. What do you mean by you're in danger? I have to say a prayer. He said remember we have a mezuzah on our door. And we left it there. We couldn't take it because we were going to come back. And every night before I went to sleep, I touched the mezuzah and kissed it. And I said, may God protect me from evil all the time.

And that's always before going to bed, even a little child like that learned that. Kissed the mezuzah before they go to bed. In the morning the first prayer was we thank you God for returning my soul, serving you with truth. And then he says, if I'm in real danger, then I have another prayer. So I look at him, what other prayer did you learn?

He was saying, I would close my eyes and say Shema Yisrael, adonai eloheinu, adonai echad, meaning hear, O, Israel, our God is our God. God is one. And then he took away his hand. And when I heard that, my heart dropped because this is a prayer of every Jew, the last prayer, a martyr's prayer.

And I thought myself here when I hear a little child like that already learned how to sanctify Gods name in his last moments. And of course, it took me to the future. And I hoped that hear, O, Israel, that God will hear this prayer. God heard, but people didn't.

And just to change the subject, something related to this subject, I'd like to say one time we were working on a railroad and unloading things. And we saw a group of German soldiers coming back from the front lines. And they were singing marching songs of victory. And then they saw us with the yellow badges. And then they start shouting to us.

And they were-- someone came up and said, would you like to have a cigarette? One of our men. He says, no, I want no cigarette from a Jew. And we turned away. And then they start mocking us and jeering us.

And you know what they cheered us with? Suddenly, I hear him say in unison, Shema Yisrael, adonai eloheinu, adonai echad, over and over. And I was just-- we didn't know what this was about. I thought, are they Jewish? We didn't know what it was about. We thought, well, what are they doing? Are they Jewish? I thought maybe they're partisans dressed in uniform.

Well, they witnessed many Shema Israels probably. And they thought they will find Jews. So they gave us regards to Israel. So this is a related story.

Then I went back to Budapest. I was-- March 19, March 18, I was there. [NON-ENGLISH]. [NON-ENGLISH] means life. March 19, I arrived. And everything was taken over by German.

And I showed them military pass. He looked over. He asked his colleague there. And he said, I work for the military. So they let me pass.

I came back. And everybody asked me what's happening there. I said to everybody, what's happening here? They are asking, what's happening here?

We received letters. One of my-- as I-- I have to go back. As I walked out of the camp in Beregszasz, brick factory, so I see three cars from a train just pulled up. And I looked over. I looked. And I see these remnants, the last people from our town, the sick, the invalids, someone on a stretcher.

And I see, I recognize some people. And they saw me, they said, where are you from? Where are you coming from? They saw me with a yellow badge with a Hungarian cap, uniform cap.

So I said I came here for one day. And I am going back. And they said to me, can you do something? Can you in Budapest intervene? And everybody says, we are here. We are the last ones. One person died before he was able to take this journey here. And everybody was saying thank God he died.

And I remember the prophet saying, there will come a horrible time when the dead will be envied by the living. And that was that time. But he died, everybody said, like an angel that he was not-- he was saved, spared from being dragged here.

And then I saw a man, Yitzhak Davidovich. He says my wife had a baby boy. And she had a miscarriage because it was too early. And the baby was alive for five days. And the baby died. Thank God, died. To hear a father say that and the mother was pale and with the other five children with them. So they were the last ones I have seen, and elderly people.

So now, back to Budapest, we received letters from there. I received a letter from a friend of mine who is now in Israel, very active in the National Religious Party. And he sent me a card. And his sender's address said [NON-ENGLISH], [NON-ENGLISH], which means out of Zion will have help. It was, of course-- they thought it was just his name.

And another card I received, the last card I received from my mother, in Hungarian, and I will translate into English. And she said, well, my dear son, they are taking us away. Where to? We don't know. We are loading the trains. And I'm dropping this in the post box, post office. We don't know where. We hope for the best. We are in God's hands. Please watch out for yourself.

Well, all the things that were written there, that they were in God's hands. They were not in God's hands. They were in Hitler's hands. And they hoped for the best. They did hope to the last minute. The one thing that she says, watch out for yourself I try to remain alive. This is how I kept honoring my mother and my father-- to remain in spite of it all, just to spite and live on, go on to live. With love, your mother, Rachel. Rachel.

When I received that card, they were in God's hands already. Three days later, they journeyed to Auschwitz. And when they started seeing that they are going towards the east and towards north, so they figured out they're not going down south to the Hungarian small villages and farms. And they arrived in-- they're coming towards Auschwitz.

And coming closer to Auschwitz, our president of our community-- he was the head of the community-- have asked the rabbi, rabbi-- and this is the name-- this is a picture of the rabbi, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Weisz. He was a scion of the dynasty of Spinka. And this man was the image of looking up at the Jew, looking up at our spiritual strength, that he kept with us.

He was able to go to the United States. He had a visa. But he refused. He said, I cannot leave my home town. I cannot leave my congregation in exile and I should go to freedom.

So he was asked by this Rabbi [PERSONAL NAME] Reiss, he said to him, Rabbi, where are we going? You must know. Tell us, where are we heading for?

And the rabbi said, can't you hear the-- can't you hear the wheels squeaking, wheels of this train? Can't you hear the crying of the wheels? The wheels are crying. The world is crying. No one hears. God will hear.

When I received this card and then I received a telegram from the shochet of Bilka, who was the ritual slaughter, they were the only two that were able to retain their beards because they were the heads of the community as far as spiritually. And the rest of the community were all-- I didn't recognize them all. They all used to have beards. And suddenly--

So this man sent a telegram. And the Telegram, it says, we're being taken away. If you can, please help. We got the Telegram. His son-in-law was in Budapest. We were trying to help.

We made an effort to find out. No one knew. We did not know. We couldn't figure out.

Some of us from the Carpathians that lived in Budapest received postcards from a fictitious place called the Waldsee, which means Forest Lake. And we looked up, there was such a thing, Waldsee near the Swiss border. So we thought maybe they're in Switzerland, maybe. Waldsee.

But my sisters never wrote to me. And I was waiting for my sister. They never wrote. And later on after the war, they told me-- those two sisters remained alive-- they told me they were afraid to send a card to me. They remember the address. But they were afraid that this will be another address for them to bring you here. They thought this is why. And this is only-- just before they went to the crematorium, they had to sign, we are fine, we are OK, we are working, we are all right, sign the name, and stamped with Waldsee.

So all this, we used to get cards. And we used to hear here and there, there were atrocities. But we never thought that it could be true.

When I look back and think about my little brother, I often wonder how cruel can people be to kill children that age and younger? And when my-- our son was born and he was little, I was hugging him and caressing him. I used to tell him the names of my brothers and sisters when he started talking, when he was 2 years old, when he was 2 and 1/2, he was almost 3. I kept touching him and hugging him. And I was thinking my little brother.

It-- it took me-- when he was 14 and a half-- those-- since we were eight children in Auschwitz, the two oldest ones were put to the right to work. And they worked in Sonderkommando, which means they were taking apart the clothing of people. And they used to put them in certain packages and send them to the bombed out places of Germany. And they were saying this is a present from the people of Hungary on their packages. And my sisters used to find, and the others who were in this department, sometimes a piece of candy or a dry piece of bread or cake or a cookie. And this helped them as far as eating there, as far as maintaining their health.

But six-- three brothers and three sisters did not make it. The oldest one that didn't make. He was 14 and a half. This one I was trying to say until our son was 14 and a half, I felt-- I always was thinking when he was three and four, I had a four-year-old sister. He was six, I had a six-year-old brother. When he was eight, I had an eight-year-old brother, and so on. When he was 14 and a half and my oldest brother didn't make it, so I felt kind of a relief of growing up with this age and always feeling that they would have been alive.

And many times when I see and I meet somebody, somebody tells me somebody is 50 years old, I was thinking, my brother would have been that age. My sister would have been-- somebody is 45, I was 42. This is how it relates still to this day after 40 years.

I would like to say that those things that we are doing now is very important, very painful and gruesome. But the story has to be told. And I know we had a gathering of the Holocaust survivors in Budapest-- in Washington, DC, thank God.

When I see a little child like this holding up, I can tell you I think my little brothers.

And this is why we have to say it. And this is why we have an obligation to do this and to remember and to tell, to say what it was, what it was like. And this is why I made it my life obligation to write about my hometown and to write the story of my hometown. And this is why I've written a thesis on our hometown, Bilka.

And here, I have the first time in 1971 when I've written it for the Rosh Hashanah supplement, "Bilka, My Hometown a Bittersweet Remembrance." And this is a picture, a drawing of the largest of three synagogues in Bilka, as remembered by me.

And I begin with a poem saying, "My son, where is your soul? Wandering the world, search it, my angel, there is a quiet village." This is a poem by Bialik, name of the poem, when your angel will ask you, where is your soul? Say, there is a quiet village surrounded by a wall of forests. A child plays there alone, angel, the child am I.

And here, I'm going to read-- I don't know whether I'll be able to-- there's a beautiful folk song about the shtetl, a little hometown, where I spent my childhood years. To me, it is just like a dream, a remote dream, as I remember Bilka.

That sentimental song of the past has turned into a lament in my thoughts and my heart. Recollections of a person's hometown inevitably evokes nostalgic memories of early childhood years. All Jews of Bilka were like one big family, living in clusters around the main streets. To anyone born and raised in Bilka, our home town meant more than just where our families lived. It was a place of joyful and sorrowful creativity, growing up, raising families, and developing the home community.

There were some 2,000 houses scattered throughout the area. The town's boundaries, six quiet brooks followed through the mountains, mountain valleys of the village. About a dozen watermills added unusual charm to form winter ice sculptures and summer waterfalls. And on the outskirts, of course, the deep and raging river of Borzhava. The population consisted of about 10,000 inhabitants, mostly Ruthenians, farmers, a few Hungarians, and over 1,000 Jews. The Jewish population lived an idyllic community life in their own tradition. Most Jews lived on farming, trade, or small home industry, tailors, cobblers, and storekeepers.

Now why I have written this, I would like to relate a story. I used to hear beautiful folk saying, or parables. And I used to hear a story saying that after a fire, one becomes rich. And I couldn't understand why is that? How can someone-- he has a fire. He's burnt down.

So I was given the explanation saying that after a person's property burns down, he starts recounting the losses. When the damages are accounted for and they are looking back what someone lost, one concludes that he was indeed rich before the fire. Before that, he didn't realize how rich he was.

This analogy I could draw also about my hometown Bilka. We had a home, parents, family, brothers, sisters, grandparents, three, four generations, uncles and aunts and cousins. The entire village was one big family.

Today, after the fire, we are looking back and thinking how great a loss, how rich we were then. Now, we are all orphaned, the remnant few. Where ten of us one stood and lived, only one still is alive. For the other nine are martyrs, missing from minyan. This memorial is a humble tribute.

And when we started gathering Bilka young boys and girls, we were sitting together and we looked around. There are about three adults who survived, three fathers and one mother. And they looked around. They said, we are all [NON-ENGLISH]. Every one of us is an orphan. We used to see someone who lost a parent. We used to pity him, help him. I'll never harm or never say no to him. And now we're all orphans.

I can say that a hometown such as we had, if someone is looking at Fiddler on the Roof, we lived it. As Sabbath, we might not have enough or plenty to eat all week long, but for the Sabbath there was always a beautiful Sabbath table set.

Thank you.

That's hard.

[AUDIO OUT]