

Good morning. My name is Abraham Kay. And today, we're interviewing Mr. Leo Rzepka, a Holocaust survivor. This project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. Mr. Rzepka, tell me a little bit about yourself today.

Well, I was born in Poland, the city of Rózan. There was a big river there, you know, mountains there, big mountains there, you know. And I was up to '39 I was staying there.

Where are you living now?

Now, I'm living in Cleveland. And--

Are you married now?

I married. I married in Israel.

And do you have a family. I have a family. I have two daughters with one son. One daughter is married. And my son-in-law, he's a doctor. He's in research. He is now working in Baltimore, Hopkins Hospital.

Johns Hopkins.

Johns Hopkins Hospital. He works there. He's in research. And my son is a doctor. He works in Youngstown. He is there.

What's his name?

His second year. Jack Rzepka. And my-- the daughter-- she's married to Daniel Stone. He's a doctor too. But she's a registered nurse. She finished in Columbus, and she used to work in Columbus in the hospital there. Then she was pregnant. Now she got the baby, you know. And then they moved to Baltimore. So now, they are staying in Baltimore.

And the youngest daughter, she's going for a registered nurse too in Columbus. She was finished teaching. But it was hard for her to get a job. They give her a job in Cincinnati. She was a year in Cincinnati. And after, they tried to give her a job, but it was not safe for her. Because of so many crimes, she refused to take the job there. She was afraid. So that they didn't give her a job.

So that my daughter used to live in Columbus. She moved to Columbus. And she teach part-time. Then she decided that she will go for nursing. So that now the third year, she's going for registered nurse in Columbus.

Are you working now?

No, I'm retired.

What was your job?

I was in remodeling, carpenter. I used to build. And so I make a good living. God bless America. So that I'm in good shape.

Now, you were telling me you were born in Poland.

I born in Poland.

What was the name of-- what was the name of the city? Rózan, Rózan. This was by 80 kilometer from Warsaw, the main town from Poland.

And I think you said between Warsaw and Bialystok.

This is between Warsaw and Bialystok. This is 80 miles from Warsaw. This is 80 miles to Bialystok, like between, you know. And I was staying up to till '39 when the war started.

When were you-- how old are you? When were you actually born?

I born in Rózan, in Poland.

No. What was your birth date?

My birth date was in March 3-- March 13 in 1913.

1913?

'13.

All Right. What are your earliest memories of--

Pardon me?

What are your earliest memories of life in Poland?

I have lots of memories. We suffer plenty from there. You know, when you go on the street, where you are somebody was drunk a little bit, you run away, you know. No security was for the Jews there. And then there is no question where you go in school. You suffer from them. You didn't got a chance even to be educated over there.

Then they make schools in the evening, you know. We went there to catch up a little bit, that the boys, from the Polands, the Gentiles, they beat us, you know. They grab us by the hair. It was impossible to even to go in school even in the night school from them.

Do you remember World War I at all?

No. No. I don't remember. And then when the war started, that the Polish people--

In '39?

In '39, we left our city. It was about 30 miles, Ostrów Mazowiecka, we left there. It was Thursday night we moved from there. We started packing because the war started already. And we find it out that they build a big fire there in our town because it was big mountains and the big river. So that we started packing. There was a little light, the Polish people they started giving us a hard time why we are making a panic, you know? So we got to stop.

And then we told the man that we hired them, the trailer, the horses, to take the horses away and let the trailer on the other side street, stay there. And in the middle of the night, you come and you pick us out. And we did it like this.

He took away the horses, you know. And they get quiet, you know. And then there was about 12:00, 1 o'clock, we got the thing. They packed everything. We took there everything there on the trailer because what we got to take, what you can pick up, and when the house burned, what you can pick up. You pick up just some clothing, you know, blankets, and a few dishes. And on the trailer, we run away.

Friday morning, and I come back. Friday, the family left over in Ostrów Mazowiecka. I come back, because my father and my brother they left still over there. Because we got it there our shop with lumber there. My father was-- he made the wagons for the farmers.

He was a specialist. He make nice things too. We got lots of material there. So that the family took the stuff, and I come back.

Friday evening, there was terrible. There was so panic in the city, no light, no nothing, you know. Moonshine, you know, no people on the street. There was so-- you feel like it's finished, you know.

Then Saturday morning, we hear on the radio that they bombard Ostrów Mazowiecka already. So we didn't know what's going on. We were scared, you know.

I took the bike, you know. I went there. There was everything all right. They bombarded some of the places there. But still was all right.

I come back. And I was Saturday night. That was the last autobus was going to Warsaw from Ostroleka that was going. So that many people, they tried to run away from there. But there was no transportation. So they walk, they walk away from there.

And then I got two bikes. It was three brothers. That one brother was at the frame. He was going like this.

Then on the road cannot go. No was place even to go. Some people with horses, some people they pull the wagon, little wagons. They all try to run away from the city.

So that anyway, we come to Ostrów Mazowiecka. And then the war, we saw from Ostrów Mazowiecka, about 30 miles, we saw the sky was red from the fire, from the-- if you hear the noise from the bombs, you know, what they bombard the city. Because in Rózan, they fight good, the Polish, they lost many Germans there. But they took over the city, but they leveled up the city to the ground.

The city of Rózan?

To the ground, the leveled up.

How big a city was Rózan?

It was maybe-- it was maybe about 400 families, Jewish.

In the whole city?

In the whole city.

And how many-- Maybe non-Jewish there was maybe about 200 families. There was altogether maybe about 700-- 800 families.

In total?

In total. It's a little city, but a nice little town was there.

Did you have a synagogue there?

Yes, we got it two synagogue there, both together. A nice synagogue.

Were they Orthodox? Or--

No, Orthodox. Yeah. And then--

Did you have your own rabbi in Rózan?

Yes. In our city, we had just one rabbi. In the synagogue, that was like here. Every synagogue, you have to belong there. You have to be a member. If not, you cannot go in to pray there. But over there, the synagogue was for the city. The people, they give donations, they help there.

But who couldn't afford for to give something, they didn't force you. Or something if you didn't want to give. But anyway, everyone who can afford, they donated for the shul. And it was open for everyone.

But there was special places where they got-- where they bought the seats. This was belong to them. When I got a seat, the kids, they can sit all around. If not here, they got the right to stay in another place, not a seat. But they can take a chair with them when they come in the holidays. For everyone was place. So that anyway--

Did you have Jewish schools in the synagogue there? Or--

Not in the synagogue.

Or you had a--

It was private schools, Jewish schools. Not in the shul like here.

Is that what you went to?

Right.

What was that like?

They call this a cheder. You got to go when you was a little. When you was five, six years, you got to go to cheder. They didn't give you in the school there.

And how long did you-- how long did you stay in the cheder?

You stay up to bar mitzvah. And some of them like to go higher, let's say to be more, they call this a yeshiva. They call this, you know. That they go in the other town, you know, in the yeshiva. And they--

Did you do that?

No, my brother was there. My brother-- he's here-- he was going to yeshiva. So my father--

What's his name?

Pardon me.

What's his name?

John. So that my father try to get at least one in the family that they will be a little more freedom, you know. So that he was going to the yeshiva up to the war. When the war broke out, he was already about 20 years, about 19 years old.

Did you go to school besides the cheder?

I go in the cheder, this was the first. But later on this was the schools. I went in school maybe I was nine years old I started to go in school. But I go just two years in school.

And what kind of school was that?

There was-- how do you call this-- a regular school.

Were there Jews and non-Jews--

Not just Jews. This was Jewish and non-Jewish together.

And the language was in Polish?

The language in Poland, right, Polish.

What was that like going to school?

Pardon me.

What was it like going to school in Poland.

I don't understand what you mean.

You know, what was it like going to school in Poland with non-Jewish-- I mean was it hard?

No, we go together in school, mixed.

Did you--

There wasn't separate Jewish or not Jewish. Just separate was that to go special Jewish [NON-ENGLISH], they call this. You see? But so in school, there was for everyone equal.

Did you like going to school?

Oh, yeah. Sure. And then after the school, I got to help my father. My father was in the-- what he worked for the-- he got a little shop, you know. It was very hard work. Over there, you didn't got it machines. Everything you got to by hand, to make the doors from rough lumber, to cut by hand, to plane them into everything.

It was a very hard life. You work 15 hours a day, from sunshine to sun dark, you know. But we make a nice living.

Did you say your father made wagons?

Wagons the wheels, for the wagons, you know? And the wagons, you know. And there was the little wagons, the nice, he made these too. He was a good mechanic for this. He know carpentry work too, you know, but windows, doors, something. So that anyway, when the war started, we left Rózan in Ostrów.

Let me ask you, how many people were there in your family all together?

There was nine-- five sisters and four brothers.

And both of your parents?

Pardon me. And the parents, yes.

Everybody was alive when the war started?

Right.

Were you the oldest or--

No, my brother is the oldest. He's in New York. He's the oldest. And I got a sister what is older from his brother, but was killed from the Germans, was killed. It was married, you know. She got a family, and was killed. I got five sisters, all of them--

All were killed?

All of them killed.

How many of you were living together? Were you all living together at the start of the war?

No. Two sisters was married, two sisters. And the oldest brother was married before the war was started.

Was everybody in the business with your father?

My oldest brother, he was in the same business, but not in the same town. He was by [NON-ENGLISH]. He lived there in a little farm place. And he was in the same business. He make the wagons. And I the same thing, I worked in this trade. Usually this trade was used in the Jewish hands, this trade.

Did you live at home up until the war?

I lived-- not up till the war. Before the war, I was in Myszyniec. This was by the border, by the German borders. I like to go a little out. I help in the family too, you know. But I like to go a little outside. And I not work, they liked me. I was couple times I worked there in Myszyniec. I got a boss. He was a nice man. He liked me so, you know. I worked there, you know.

And he, before the war, a week before the war, he told me, Leo, you got to leave because it was far. If you wait a couple of days, I wasn't able to go home because the war was starting. This was maybe about 8 kilometers from the border, from the German border. How happen? My boss, he was friend with the chief from the police.

Was he Jewish?

Jewish, yes. He was friend with the chief from the police, from this town. In the old time, they come together. They make a schnapps together. He liked them too. He was a nice man.

Maybe he got some connections the Germans, the chief of the police, like the Volksdeutsche, something, you know. And he told my boss, said something that, he told him information about our city, Rózan, that they tried to catch this town as soon as possible because there is a river, mountains. He told him the story that, he told, Leo, go as soon as possible. He paid me off. And go.

When I go to the train there, there was a little train was going to the Ostroleka there. It was a station from the train. When I go to the train, I was lucky that I find it a place even to go on the train to go away from there because they started mobilize the army, the Polish, you know.

So I come home, and I told him the story. So when we started that the war started-- we hear that the war started, that I know already what's going on. That they-- they said, we'll be the first. So that we hired this wagon to get out of there.

That's why he wanted to get out.

Right. Then--

Let me ask a little bit more about before the war started. You left school, you left cheder at 13.

Yes.

And you left the Polish school as well.

Yes.

All right. Did you become an apprentice for your father? Were you-- at that time when you went into the business or did you just--

No, my father, he was supposed to get-- the call this a [NON-ENGLISH], they call this, like a degree that tells that he's-- and every one, before the war, couple of years before the war, they make this. If you started to go for yourself, you have to have-- they call this a [NON-ENGLISH], like a diploma that you qualified to do this work.

And did you go for that?

No, I didn't go for this. But they didn't-- first of all, I didn't go for myself in business so that they couldn't bother me about this. If I would started to go for myself, I needed this. See? So that they didn't bother me. But I worked from somebody else. That I was a good shape. They didn't bother me. I was able to get it this to if I need it because I know the trade good. The trade saved me my life, the trade.

Was your family a religious family?

My family was religious. But now I'm a little not so because how much experience I have already what the religious give you. The time not too much to believe, plain simple, that somebody behind you what they can help you by this religious.

What was a typical week like in your life when you were growing up?

Pardon me.

When you were growing up, what was a normal week like? What would happen during the week? You would work. What would a week be like for you?

What mean what I like?

No, no. What would happen during a normal week as you were growing up?

Well, I will get married, you know, and I will open a business, the same thing. And--

Did you get married before the war?

No.

No, no. I mean, but as you say, you were 13, 14 years old, what was life like then?

Oh, when I was in this age, 13, 14?

This age.

We didn't think about nothing. We didn't gotten even something to think about it. What we think we enjoy nights with friends. There was a different life like here. Over there, when you finish work or something, you go on the street gathering friends, you know, and you enjoy. You play. It's a different kind of life. Like here this is not the same life like here.

What was it like? What did you do?

Over there, the boys or some friends or something, you didn't was afraid to go out, even the middle of the night or something to play around. You enjoy it, the life there. You didn't was afraid.

Over there, if you was going behind something in the night, when you see somebody, you feel more safety over there because this friends. But here, you go somewhere, that you see somebody, you scared. It was a different life there. So that we enjoy-- we didn't think about the future or something.

Did you belong to any clubs--

Yes, we got organization there, Hashomer Hatzair, HeHalutz, you know, [NON-ENGLISH], they call this. Before I used to belong to the [NON-ENGLISH] in the college, you know.

And what did you do with that?

And then we come what every night, we come there, we dance. We song. We enjoy. Saturday, we went in the woods there. We play around there. It was a nice area, you know.

Were there any Zionist groups at all? Did anybody talk about going to Israel then?

Yeah. There was the HeHalutz and Hashomer Hatzair. They, from there, they were preparing to go to Israel. Even in the [NON-ENGLISH], how to call this, the same thing. Everyone work to go to Israel. It was the Hehalutz was the organization. Let's say you was in the organization, then you got to go-- they call this like Hachsharah-- for a year or two years to work, to learn the trade, not to be afraid of work or something, to get used to hard work. When you come to Israel, not to be afraid of hard work. To prepare, you know.

And did you do that at all?

No, I didn't go there-- on this.

Did you ever think about going to Israel?

Sure. But you didn't get a chance to go because two years you can-- let's say, you got a place to go to Israel let's say for two or four people a year or two years. Everyone tried to go. But they didn't let in. Is what they make Hachsharah, you got to go on Hachsharah. If you go on Hachsharah, you finish Hachsharah, then you got it, you was in the first line when it will be space for you to go. But not for everyone. If I ever got the chance to go, I will go like this. I will fly. Because, you see, in the end, couple of years before the war, it was impossible to go on the street in the night of the Polish boys, you know.

What was happening then?

They beat you. When you go to the police to report that this guy beat you, you know what answer they give you? You still alive. This was the answer from the police.

And I got it once, you know. I used to teach dancing. I got a group dancing. That every night, they come together, you know, and I was already older. I got a room in the back.

Was this in your home town?

My house. In my parents' house.

In Rózan? Yeah.

In Rózan. Then I learned then how happen. I used to go to another town. And there was a dance. It was from this town they make a special who will take the first place, you know. And I used to be a good dancer, you know. So the girl grabbed me to go. She put me my name. I didn't even know her. When they come to dance, she come and they call my name. I was excited. Who give my name? I didn't feel to go today, you know.

She grabbed me, come. And I was started dancing. There was maybe about 20 couples after they pick up more-- they took away from there. And I left over three. And the three couples, I was there too. When I left only the three couple, then I started, you know, and they picked me up that I win the prize.

Then when I come back, they all-- it was a little town. There was another way to find out that I took the first place. So from the boys my age, everyone to come to learn dancing. I become a teacher. So that I started thinking of dancing.



What happened, once they come, the Polish army, they make their-- they call this maneuvers. They train the army there. In our town was a school from officers in the town, but they come from other places there because there was a big town-- a big mountains there and the river.

Anyway, all day, when the army, the Polacks, they look around for Jews living in the day. And after when it get dark, they started attacking the Jews.

The houses?

The houses. The army, you know. So I didn't know. Before the girls, the boys, they come, and I teach them the dance. So I finish about 11:30, about 12 o'clock. They started to go out. They going out.

In the front was a light. They come, the soldiers, maybe about 10 of them. They started coming to the house. But the girls, they went back in the yard. They closed the door in the back. They was afraid.

And we, couple guys, we was staying in the front. Then they come over. And they asked me what religious I am. I said, what's going on what religious? Because I didn't look like a Jew, you know.

And then there was another one, he was looking like a Jew. They started to beat him, you know. So when they start to beat him, then I like this. I escaped them. They start chasing me, you know. And I run away.

And then I went to the police there, you know. I come and there was in a flea market there. I go there, look what's going on. In the corner, there was on the second floor a man look from the porch there. He say, Rzepka, Rzepka, run away. Over there was yelling, screaming--

Rzepka is your name?

My name, Rzepka. Run away because it's danger. So I started running. I started running. I run in the direction from the police station, to report for the police.

I come to the police station. I say that-- I didn't go in the building. And I saw nobody in the station even. And the light is light-- I was afraid. That was not far from our house. I was afraid maybe they will see me that I run away. I run away in a little street.

And then I look in there. And I hear somebody started chasing to me. I started to run away. I come in a little yard, in a corner. And I stand up like this. And he come over there, and he catch me. And he started beating me like this.

I got a little watch. And I protect myself like this. And then a couple of times he give me-- he hit me. He turn off the watch. And then he left me. He ran away. He ran away.

Then I said, ooh. I shake up a little that I feel good. Then I started-- I said, this is not finished with me. Then I started to place to look to hide.

There was a little place to go over from this on the other side street. Then I go over there on the street, I hear couple guys, the soldiers, going in the yard and was looking for me. There was a bakery there.

Then I went on the other side street. And I run away. What they did it? They went in the bakery there. Was a Jewish bakery. And they beat all of them. Put sand, they put in the flours there. They make a mess there.

All right, then on the morning when we went to the police to report what happened, nothing happened. They marked what happened, you know. And this and this, nothing happened.

And they didn't try to catch--

Nothing. Usually--

What year was this? Do you remember--

This was in the year 1938. 1938.

Were there--

Beginning 1938.

Were there other things that happened to you before the war that were because you were Jewish?

Before the war, sure. We got it-- all times we got it, fight with the boys, with the Gentile boys, with the Polish. The hate the Jews, you know. And they put signs on the-- this was year I think 1937 or 19-- between '37, '38, they put signs on the stores not to buy Jews. On the telephone poles and the electric poles to put signs not to buy Jews.

And then later on, they come to the store. They're picketing by the stores. They didn't let in the Polish people to go in to the Jewish store-- before the war. There was a year, maybe a year and a half.

Did you hear about the Nazis in Germany before--

Sure, we hear because in 1935 or '36, there come Jews from the Germany. I don't remember exactly what year it was. Because they let them go out, they come many Jews to come to Poland from Germany.

And what did you hear?

We hear what Hitler doing to the Jews there. We hear from them. There's no question.

All right, what did you think of everything that was going on?

You cannot help nothing. You cannot do it nothing. See, we here we know what comes first, what, no help.

Were you ever in the Polish army? Were you ever in--

No, I was-- they didn't got time to take me. They go so fast, they didn't get the time to take me.

But when you were younger you weren't in either?

No, because I was in this age to go in the army. But when broke out the war, they didn't get the time even to take the army. Even when they take some to the army, they didn't got even suits to give them, ammunition to give them, so fast they was going, the Germans.

And now, when we come to Ostrów Mazowiecka, when the Germans that go from-- when they took over Rózan, they started go, they wipe off the city completely.

Do you remember what day that was? The date or when--

When the what? I remember it was Thursday night we left the city.

All right. Was that the first day-- was that the first night of the war?

No, that was couple of days before the start of the war. But we left Thursday. Friday night, they bombard-- Friday they bombard Ostrów Mazowiecka. My family was already there.

Now this is September '39.

In '39, right. And then when the Germans they took over Rózan. And they started going, Ostrów they took maybe one day they was already in Ostrów. The main thing is they took over our city.

When they come to-- there was a little town, Goworowo they call this. There was about 15 kilometer from our city. This is between Rózan and Ostrów Mazowiecka. There was a little town there. The most Jewish there.

Is what happened when they come over there, when they was flying on airplane, that the Polish army, they shoot to this airplane. So when they took over there, they come in this town that they was blaming the Jews.

For shooting the airplane?

For shooting the airmen. So they took the old Jews. They took them in a shul there, all of them. And they put kerosene, and they lighted the shul. Many of them was burned. Many of them was already dead.

Did you see this or--

No, I didn't. Because when the Germans they took over there, we come together, some what left over. Then they come there are big men, German, like a general or something, he saw the story. He says, what's going on there? He stopped them not to do this. But many of them was already burned, got burns when they did it.

Then over there there was a-- you know what a shochet is?

Mm, hmm.

When he left that he got this tool, was his-- the knife, the big knife, maybe about 16 inches, a long knife. This was his tool, what he slaughtered the cows. He got it with him in pocket. He was stupid. So that they find this knife by him. And they find it, the knife, by him. You know what they did it to him? They cut off the head with this knife.

This is the Germans?

The Germans. And then they took the Jews, the old Jews, for work, for slave labor. No food. They beat them. The forced labor, they give them. They got to clean up the old-- the bodies and this. They all got to do the Jews.

Let's talk about personally now. You said you were going with your two brothers with the two bicycles.

Yes.

All right. Where were you going to?

To Ostrów.

All right. And then what happened? Did you get there?

Sure. I came there because the Germans still didn't was there.

So what happened to you when you got to Ostrów?

And then we come to Ostrów. That nobody was waiting when the Germans come there. OK, that you were already here. So they grabbed the Jews right away for work.

Did they take you then?

No, me they didn't take because I didn't look so for a Jew, you know. And who was hiding in the houses, they didn't go from house to house because they catch from most the street. Why they catch in the street?

You look for food, plain simple. When you look for food they grab your out of work.

So is what happened when they took over already so that we left over the property, this material, the lumber. We got a big, like a lumber yard, because this trade you need lots of lumber because it's got to dry. You cannot work with--

Greenwood.

Soft wood. You got to stay a couple of years to dry up. So they got lots of material there. So when they took over there, then I took the two bikes with me and my brother and my brother-in-law. We went to Rózan, see what's going on there, if it's left over something.

When we come there to Rózan, the bridge was bombarded, damage on one side. So just for the army. You cannot go through the bridge. What happened? It was a little before the town was woods there. When it was so about 5:00 6 o'clock, it was already dark. So we stopped there. You couldn't go through the bridge there.

So we stopped there. We stay overnight over there. There was just women, no men. When we come there, you know, they says, God, my God, how come we here? No man, no nothing. What happened there?

Then there was-- on the morning, we went there to the lake there. And we call our boy, he got a little boat. He took us over on the other side. We paid him. We started going to the town there. We saw it--

This is Rózan?

In Rózan. We tried to go to our house what happened there. Because anyway, we by the Germans. What is the difference is we here or over there. We started going. We meet our lady, a Gentile, a lady.

Then we stop her. And I ask her, look, where do you live? She tried to explain me where she lived that she was my neighbor. We got a corner house. And she bought us a big farm, maybe about 500 feet from us, in a corner there. She bought this farm from this and this man. What say, that the corner house?

And she says, nothing there left over. Forget it. And you better go back because it's very dangerous because they took the old men there, the Jewish. And they put them in the church there. No food, no water, no nothing. Many of them is already dead.

All the Jewish men from Rózan?

The Jewish, they put them in the church, the church left over there. So please, run away. We hear this, OK, we go back. We call the boy. He was still playing around then. He took us back on the other side, the river.

And we went back home. We find the little boy from my cousin. He was there. We took him to Ostrów too. We was walking with the army. They was going--

The Polish army?

No, the Germans. Not by truck. They got horses. So that we walk with them together. When they make lunch time, they give us food too. They give us food. They're plain soldiers.

We come to Ostrów. We come to Ostrów back. You know what happened in Ostrów? We come back, they tell us the story. In the day when we left, they took the old Jews. And there was like a flea market, a big open place. They call them, all of them. They got to come there. If they will not come, they will be shot to death.

Everyone was afraid to come there. And all them up to 6:00 in the night on the market. It was already dark. Then they got a speech for them that they is not allowed to go after 6:00. Who will go after 6:00 will be shot to death. And they hold them about 7 o'clock. And then they told them to go home. When they started to go

home, the army they started shooting from all around. They started shooting on them.

First, they made the speech, then they started to shoot them?

After they released them to go home, they started shooting on them. Many go between in the yards, lay on the land, the ground, they stay overnight. And many of them, they kill them.

And then later on, the German army, they went there to the people. And they robbed them. They took away what they got it on the ring, so watches, everything. And then some of them they went for a complaint there in the main office from the Germans in the complaint. They said, well, they act-- well, is not allowed to do this. Who do this? But they didn't do nothing. And this happened.

Then grab the Jews from work. They beat them. And we stayed there like a couple of days more in Ostrów. And then, we hear that we can go to the Russian side. This was Zambrów.

I said, well, if you have a chance to go there, not to wait even-- right away, we started looking for a trailer to rent. We took again what we got, some clothes, the dishes, and the blankets. And we went to the Russian side. And then we went over there. They come there.

Where did you actually go?

To Zambrów, on the Russian side.

Do you remember when that was? Do you remember approximately when that was? Was it 1939 still?

This was in '39. This was already after the holidays, the Jewish holidays. The war started before the holidays. In the holidays, I was in Ostrów, still there. And the worst word what they did it, they took you when there was the holidays. And then they ask, where is our God? Where's your God? So that then we went-- we was in the Russian side. The Russian side was not bad there.

Were allowed to do that freely to go over to the Russian side?

Yes, they check you if you got something. They see what you don't have nothing. Go. [NON-ENGLISH], they call it [NON-ENGLISH].

But who was going there when they gathered something, they took away. They didn't let you go over. It turns out you got what they will take the dishes or the blankets. They didn't need it, this junk. So that we went there. We was by the Russian up to '41.

What did you do when you-- what was the name of the city again?

Zambrów.

All right, were you in Zambrów until '41?

Yes. Not till '41. We was in Zambrów up to '40.

What did you do in Zambrów?

We worked there. We worked for the army, for the Russian army. You work carpenter, by doors, windows, because after this there was lots of damage. They need trades. So that we work for them. Because by them you cannot get a job for yourself by the Russians. You got to work by them.

Who were with then?

Me, my father, my brothers.

All of your brothers were still together?

Yes.

And your brother-in-law.

Just one brother was married. That he was over there in the little town, not far from Lomza. Over there was the Russian too. So that he got his own job there.

But after the war, we didn't work from our trade. We changed for carpenter work because you cannot work for this because you didn't got this material, this everything. So that we work carpenter work. We fix doors, windows, there from the army. So that they make a living from them.

When you have a trade, you cannot get lost when you have a trade. A business is different. And a trade is different. With a trade you can survive.

So that we work there. In '40, the late '40, the Russians gave an order that the all people from the other side, they cannot stay close to the border. They got to move away 100 kilometer from the border.

Into Russia?

Deeper to Russia. So that we moved to Slonim.

We-- your father--

The Russian make us to move. That the whole family, my father and my mother, all they moved there in Slonim. And then we moved there. And the same thing, we went there to the-- we work for the army there. We work there. We make a living. And then I decided before the war about three months--

When you were working for the Russians, did you have enough food?

Yeah, you can buy food.

And clothes and--

It was hard to get it close. To buy clothes, you got-- when they bring some clothes, you got to stay in the line to buy clothes. Everything in the line. For bread, for everything, you got to stay in the line.

Did the Russians know that you were Jewish?

Yes.

Did they treat you differently because of that?

No, the Russians don't treat me difference. Equal with the Russians, in this time. But the Germans what happened, when the Germans took over-- I didn't explain how they did it. Jews is not allowed to buy food. No food. They took you for labor, for slave labor. They beat you, but no food. Was hard to get food.

So that we decided to go on to the Russian side. So we went there. And was over there not bad. OK, to buy something, you got to stay in the line. Some people they go in the middle of the night to grab a line because when they open 8:00, 9 o'clock the stores, when you come to the line, you got a line maybe about half a mile. So that you come-- who come first, they got at first. Anyway this was not so bad.

But when the war started in the-- yeah, they make us to move to Slonim. Then we moved there. And we stayed there. But after, when they started the war in '41--

You mean in June of '41?

In June-- in '41, when they started. Before when I decided-- before the war, three months before the war, I decided I will go for another-- I like to be a mechanic, how to mechanic, a driver. So that I went there and I give a application that I like to be a chauffeur, they call this.

They accept me. They give me examine if I know a little riding or figuring. And I passed the test. So they took me there.

Where was that?

In school, there was not far from Minsk. This is in Russia, the Russian border. I was there, there was a school for three months.

When I was there, they pay you even for-- you in school, they pay you wages. For the school, you didn't pay. They paid you. Because when you went there, you was already in the army. You see, they learn you, not for you private life, but--

For the army.

--part from them. So that what happened in the morning, by 9 o'clock, the school, let's see, start at 10 o'clock, from 8:00 to 10:00, you got to go in-- got to walk until like the army and then in school. But anyway-- but no choice, so that I was there.

Was a school in Russian or in Polish?

No, in Russian. From the beginning, it was hard for me to catch up this because the language Russian. What was a little hard for me, but I made this. We got to get the license. Two days we got to get the license, two days before broke out the war.

Meaning when Germany invaded Russia?

The Germans, Russians, in '41. So what I didn't want run away to go to Russia because I left my parents in Slonim. And I got two little sisters. What I will go there, and I know the Germans, it will be hard for them to get food or something, because my father got a beard and this.

So I decided I will not run to Russia. I will go back home. When the Russian come over there, then I started walking home, no transportation. I make 40, 50 miles a day. I walk from beginning to late night I was walking.

I walking with a few boys. When the Germans, they stop us, they started beating them. But they didn't touch me. They think that I am not a Jew. Then later on they tell me to kick them, that I kick them, they think that I am not a Jew. I say, fine, fine, fine, good. So that I was going.

When I come home, again trouble. No food, no nothing. How to get food? When you go on the line for food, when they see that you are Jew, they kick you out of the line.

This is in Slonim.

In Slonim. But the Germans, they kick you out from the line. You cannot get it, food. So it was-- we got hungry.

My mother she got a little flour, you know what they make the pumpernickel bread. She took a little flour with water and mixed up to make and this we was feeding the family. Was terrible.

So that then they come a group from-- they call this [NON-ENGLISH]. This apart from Lomza-- I mean from Poland, on the other side, the border, there was the worst like Nazis. They helped the Nazis.

They were Polish?

They were Polish too. Then they make a selection. Aktion, they call this, Aktion. They took the Jews.

When was this?

This was in '41.

Was it right away in '41?

Right away. What happened before they make the Aktion, they took the old Jews by the leave and they concentrate them in one place. They make them to move. So that we move from their town then, over there the old Jews. They got a little-- not in the town, like-- so they make them to move all in one place.

It was already an no place. Then they come over there to take the Jews to kill them. Is what happened, the [NON-ENGLISH], they helped them. They go from house to house. They took out the people and they push them over there. They beat them. Over there on the flea market was like a big place.

Over there was trucks. They put them on the trucks. And they took them in the woods. And they shot them one by one.

Where were you when that was happening?

What happened I was in the house. I know how happened that my brother when they started there was a little trap door there in the ceiling. That my brother and my brother-in-law went there to close this. They took the ladder over there. All they got there, that they started looking.

So that I think I will stay there. So that they will happy they will have one, they will not touch the rest. And my father he was laying in the bed, like he's sick. He cannot walk. We didn't know what they going to do. We think that they going to grab for work. They grab.

Is what happened, you see that they-- he lay in the bed. And I was staying by the door on the side. And I opened the door. And the shovel was on the side. And I think I hold the shovel ready. If they will come to the house, I will jump out and I grab the shovel so that I will save, not that they will beat me.

The shovel?

The shovel was staying in the side. So that I will grab the shovel. And I will go out, not to hit them, but to go to work. I think that they take for work. So that I will save not to get-- beat, and I will save that they don't will look for the rest because they see that they got it ready.

I was takes on the side. And what happened? They passed this and they didn't come in the house. So they didn't come, OK, fine.

What happened? They took away them. No one was returned back. No one. They took them in the woods and they shot them.

This was everybody else from the city?

Not all of them. Part of them. And then who left? All they left, who they take them away, they never come back. So but then--

How did you learn what happened?

Pardon?

How did you learn what happened to the people who were shot?



What I learned?

How did you learn that?

What you mean how you learn?

How did you find out that that's what happened?

Because they didn't come back. And then, later on, the Polish, they started-- you pick up from-- some time you pick up from somebody. If I don't pick up, somebody else pick up. So that we find it out that--

So that's what happened.

All of them, gone. What they doing before, they take people to work-- the Jewish people. They take them from work there in the woods. They make the graves. They make-- they dig the graves. They don't for what they're going to do with this, to make everything ready, prepared. And then they take the people there, and they shot them one by one.

Into the graves.

In the grave. And then they left over even a few of them what they got to cover this. And to the end, they give them a few bullets and they give them to what they did at all time.

Then I decided it's very bad there, no food, no nothing. But my brother-in-law was married to my sister. She got two little kids. My younger sister, she was about 14, the age you know. And I got an older sister, 16. That older sister, she was left there. And I took the younger sister with me and my brother-in-law and the oldest sister she was married. And she got the two kids with her. And she went-- I got another sister in Zambrów, I got a sister.

So that I think we will go to Zambrów. And maybe over there, it's much better because no mail, no telephone, no nothing. We took a chance. What we can lose? We were going to cross here back there.

We went to the train-- to a cargo train because no transportation. We find a train there. So we go on the train. We started to go to Zambrów.

We come to Bialystok. And the train was changed, the train. The train is not going farther. So that had to look transportation from Bialystok to Zambrów. It was hard to get. So that we started looking for another train there. And then there was a Polish guy, he started talking at the station to the Germans. And to say that the Jews is bad. They run to the Russian.

And he said, when the Jews they ask me what direction to go, I showed them in the opposite way. He was laughing. He was enjoying. We wasn't so bad shape. He was enjoying this.

It was another German. He say, he took us to the side and say, look, over there is a train there, a cargo train. You go there. This train goes to Zambrów. A German in the side he took us. And then we went there to the train.

We go on the train. The train took us on halfway to Zambrów. And then they stopped. Then we go out. And then we go back, but we come to Zambrów.

We come to Zambrów I find my sister. She was married too over there in Zambrów. Over there was fine.

Who from your family were you with now in Zambrów? Was the whole family still together?

No. My father, my mother, and my sister, and my brother-- older from me. He was left over--

In Slonim.

In Slonim.

And the rest of you?

And the rest, I come to Zambrów. I come with my younger sister and the oldest sister and my brother-in-law. And she got two kids.

OK.

We come to Zambrów.

We're going to take a break now for just a couple of minutes.

OK.

OK.