

I'm Allen Binstock, and today we are interviewing David Schneider, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland section. Mr. Schneider, can you please tell us how old you are?

Right now am 62 years old.

And where do you live?

I live in Mayfield Heights.

Ohio?

Mayfield Heights, Ohio. Yes.

Are you employed?

Yes. I'm self-employed. I'm a painting contractor.

And are you married?

No. I'm widowed right now.

Do you have any children?

No. I don't have any children.

And how long were you married?

I was married 5 and 1/2 years. And my wife died of cancer.

Mr. Schneider, let's talk about what your life was like before the Second World War. Now, you've told us that you are 62 years old. Where were you born? I was born in Poland, in a city that is called Boryslaw, which was near-- I guess it was the state of the main city was called Lwów, or in German Lemberg. And where I'm from, they had they had oil, crude oil.

An oil industry?

Oil industry, yes. And this is what mainly the whole industry revolved around was the oil industry.

And what part of Poland was this in?

That was the Southeastern part of Poland.

I see. Was Boryslaw, what type of city was it? Well, it was mostly industrial. There were about I don't know how many people were there when I was born. But in 1939, the beginning of the war, there were about I heard about 42,000 people.

I see. So it was a fairly large town that you lived?

Yes. Yes.

You said that it was an industrial city. Was it primarily the oil industry, or were there--

Primarily the oil industry.

Any other types of major--

They also had wax.

Wax?

Wax, they had. I know they had wax. You mean like candle works or something?

Yeah. So they dug wax from underground. And that's as much as I know what they did over there.

I see. Were there many Jews who lived in this town?

There were about 15,000 Jews in the city. So there was about a third of Jews in that city.

So it was a fairly large Jewish population?

Yes, it was. Yeah.

OK. Let's talk about your family for a few minutes.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Well, we were five children. There was my father, my mother, and we were five children. We were four brothers and one sister. I was the second oldest, then was my sister, and then two more brothers. And my father came from a different area of the city. He was not born in the same city.

He came from central Poland, from a different city. My mother came from a village from nearby. And they met somehow, and they got married, and they lived in the city of Boryslaw. Do you have any idea what brought them to Boryslaw at all? This I wouldn't know. I guess either somebody introduced them or they met. I don't know how it worked out. They never told me and I never asked them. I never thought about it.

Do you recall the names of your brothers and your sister?

Well, my older brother's name was Psachie. It's an unusual name. I never knew anybody else by that name.

Is that a Polish name?

No. It's a Hebrew name.

Hebrew name?

Yes, Psachie. My name is David. My sister's name was Helen. Then there was a brother by the name of Aron, and another brother by the name of Izak.

And what were your parents' names?

My father's name was Abraham. And my mother's name was Sophie.

OK. And how long did you live with your parents until what age?

I lived with my parents until they were taken away from me, which was '41-- I think it was in 19-- I think 1940-- let's see the year. '41, so '41. '42.

So you stayed with them all?

In '43. Yeah, until 1943.

I see. What was your father's occupation?

My father was a glazier. He would put in windows in people's homes when the glass would be broken. This was mainly his profession.

I see.

And did your mother have a profession at all?

No. My mother had enough work staying home taking care of five children.

I'm sure she did.

Yeah.

How would you describe your family? Were they comfortable, well-to-do?

No. We were not comfortable or well-to-do. I would say we were poor people.

I see.

Everything my father possessed was in one pocket of his pants, all the money he had, was in one of his pockets, or maybe two pockets. I don't know. He never had to the best of my knowledge, never had a bank account or anything like that.

Did you work to help out with things?

Beg your pardon?

Did you work when you were younger to help?

Well, when I was 16 years old, it was the only thing that was available. I started to learn how to paint. I entered as a journeyman to learn the painting trade.

So I worked. So I learned from that was I was 16, since I was 16. That was 1938 until 1939. It was one year. I worked as a painter learning the trade.

As an apprentice?

As an apprentice, yes, not journeyman, as an apprentice.

And then the Second World War broke out. Germany invaded Poland. And within two weeks, within two weeks, the German forces occupied the area, the country. And then at that time, they had an agreement with Russia that they were going to split Poland in half.

So they knew exactly how far the German forces are going to go and how far the Russians. So when the Germans came in, after a few weeks or so, they moved out. And they let the Russians occupy that area.

So your town was occupied by the Russians?

It was occupied by the Russians in 1939.

But you worked as an apprentice up until that time?

Up till that time, yes.

And prior to being an apprentice painter, had you helped your father at his glazing trade?

Yes, I helped out whenever he needed my help. Anybody in the house helped him out whatever it was necessary.

Before we talk about the war, let's talk a little bit more about your family. What was life like in your family? Tell us a little bit about it.

Well, we had a rented second floor apartment, sort of an apartment. The apartment consisted of two rooms, a kitchen and a bedroom. In the summertime, we lived in the kitchen and the bedroom. In wintertime, everybody went into the bedroom. There were seven people living in the bedroom-- mother, father and five children living in the bedroom and cooking, eating, sleeping, washing yourself, everything was in winter time in one room.

What sort of facilities did you have? Did you have any running water?

We didn't have no running water.

Any toilet facilities?

No toilet facilities.

What sort of heating did you have?

Heating? There was a little stove in the middle of the room. And you made a fire. And everybody stood around. The cooking was done on that stove, and you just stood around there and warmed yourself, turned your back and turned your front and warmed yourself.

A coal stove?

Wood or coal, whatever you put in, it was burning.

I see.

Any electricity?

No electricity. We had a kerosene lamp, no candles. There were candles, but it would be too expensive to use candles for that. So we used kerosene lamps for that. And my father used to go to the villages outside of the city. He would take glass, fix windows for people. And they would give him potatoes. They would give him cabbage, some other vegetables. And we would keep potatoes, we would accumulate about 1,000 pounds of potatoes that would keep us going through the winter, five people. Every day was potato day.

Cooking potatoes until spring. So he would accumulate for the work potatoes. And this is what kept us mainly going, bread we would buy from the bakery.

Who would you say made the major decisions in your family?

I guess my father made the major decisions.

And was it a close knit family?

Were you close with your brothers and your sister and your parents?

Well, I wouldn't understand. In those days, you know, life was tough. Nobody thought how close knit it was or what. You just lived every day. And you just tried to make the best out of it and survive.

It's hard to compare.

Well, what was a typical day like in your family? What was your day like?

Well, we went to school. We went to school. Come home from school, eat, go out and play. Then when I would be working, I would just be working six days a week. Over there, there were no five days work. It was six days work.

You mean when you were an apprentice painter?

Yeah.

You worked six days.

I worked six days, yes. I worked six days.

What was the neighborhood like? Did you live in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood?

It was a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. I lived on the main street of the city. Downstairs, the two landlords, they shared two apartments downstairs. And we lived upstairs. So we were the only tenants upstairs.

Did the Jews live in one particular part of the city, or was it more integrated than that?

I would say they were not living-- the Jews were living mostly scattered. It was in some places there were more Jews, some less. But I wouldn't say that they lived especially in one area.

So did you have neighbors who were not Jewish?

We had neighbors that were non-Jewish and we had neighbors that were Jewish.

Did you socialize with both of them?

Yes. We socialized with all of them. Yeah.

How religious was your family? My father was very religious. He didn't have a beard, but he prayed every day.

Would you say he was Orthodox?

He was Orthodox, yes.

And was he observant?

He was observant. He was Orthodox. He never worked on a Saturday. He smoked, but he never smoked on Saturday. He always had to smoke. But on Saturday, he never smoked. He could stay away from it with no problem.

Do you recall what the Jewish holidays were like in your home?

The Jewish holidays were festive and observant. It was a big thing to observe. It was natural to observe a Jewish holiday.

And do you remember them as joyous occasions when you were growing up?

Yes. The Jewish holidays were very joyous. Yes.

Did you observe the non-Jewish holidays? Were there Polish national holidays that you observed?

Well, the Polish national holidays you observed because you didn't go to school. That's as far, but not the Christian religious holidays. It was not like that.

Did your family belong to a particular synagogue?

Yes. My father belonged to a synagogue. But you could go and pray anywhere you wanted to.

Well did he use the synagogue just for prayer or were there other social or cultural events that you were involved with, with the synagogue?

Mostly it was for prayer. But for cultural things, I don't remember seeing anything for cultural things. It was everything was connected with religious observances.

I see. So it wasn't a place where people came for a dance or a party.

Never, never a dance. No.

OK.

Never a dance.

Do you recall attending any weddings or bar mitzvahs at the synagogue?

I never attended a wedding or a bar mitzvah in the synagogue. Bar mitzvah, they used to have one they announced who became bar mitzvah. That was the thing.

Well, were you bar mitzvahed?

Yes.

So they used to give-- they used to give some whiskey and some cake. And-- you did the regular prayers that comes with those services. And that was it. But there were no dances because of bar mitzvah.

There was no special party?

There was no special party.

That was not the custom at the time?

No, no.

As the person who was bar mitzvah, did you lead the services at your bar mitzvah?

To lead the service?

Well, what exactly did you have to do when you were bar mitzvahed?

I would read the blessings of the Torah, and the guy that read the Torah, he would do his reading. And I would say the blessing at the end and that was it. And the haftarah, which was the prayer for that particular week.

I see. Moving on to a slightly different subject, were you in any way involved with any Zionist organizations or other political groups when you were younger?

About a year, one year before the war started, I'd say about a year before that, I joined a Zionist organization. But it was mostly for social reasons.

I see.

Come together with the people your age. We used to sing and dance. And they had speeches. And that was about it.

Do you remember the name of the organization?

Akiba.

I see.

Were you involved in any other political organizations before the war?

No. That's all I was involved with.

How about your parents? Were they interested in Zionism at all before the war?

No. As far as I know, they didn't have much movement among older people at that time.

Or your brothers, were they involved?

My older brother also belonged to a Zionist organization.

The same one as yourself?

Not the same one, but it was similar, also a Zionist organization.

Do you remember the name of that group? I think it was Hanoar.

Hanoar?

I think so.

Did you or your family belong to any other community organizations in the town?

No. My father belonged to a tradesman's organization.

Was it like--

Tradespeople.

Was it like a trade union, or was it more just a craftsman?

A social, a social craftsman group.

Did they have a welfare fund to help each other out?

They would get together. They would play cards. They'd talk.

I see.

They would have some parties, eating parties. That's the kind of parties.

I see. But as far as you know, it wasn't involved in collective bargaining or anything like that.

No. No collective bargaining.

They were primarily employed by themselves?

That's right.

I see. What was the language that was spoken in your home?

In our home the language was spoken was Jewish.

You mean Yiddish?

Yiddish, Jewish.

OK.

I didn't start speaking Polish till I started to go to Polish schools. I didn't start speaking Polish until I started to go to schools at the age of six.

Were your parents conversant in Polish? Did they know Polish?

They knew some Polish. They weren't very good at it. But they conversed in Polish. Yes.

But as far as discussion in the home it was Yiddish?

At home, it was always Yiddish, yes.

OK. Were there any books in your home?

Books?

Besides religious books, were there any other types of books in the home?

Well, my brother would get some books from a library. He would read. And I would get a chance to read them too when he got it later on.

I see. What language were those in?

Polish.

In Polish, so they were from the public library?

Public library, yes.

I see. Was there much reading done in your house?

Well, my older brother did the reading. I did the reading. I guess that's about it.

Did your father read any newspapers, or your mother?

My father read Jewish newspapers, which you could buy.

Were there a number of them published in your town, a number of Yiddish newspapers?

They were not published in our town. They were brought in from outside of the city.

I see. Did he read any Polish newspapers?

No. My father, he was not well versed in Polish.

OK. Were there any theaters in your town that you went to?

Theaters?

There were traveling visiting theaters. People would, some theater casts would come in from outside of the town. They would travel. They would put on a performance. They would go from house to house and ask for props, collect props to help them put on the show-- lamps, brooms, furniture, anything they needed just to put a show together.

And then what sort of a hall would they perform in?

They would rent a regular movie theater. In our town, there were two movie theaters or three. And they would rent that hall for that one day.

Now, are you thinking here of-- are you speaking here of Yiddish theater groups that would come?

Yes, I'm talking about Yiddish theater groups. Yes.

And where would they come from? From Warsaw?

From other cities. Maybe Warsaw, maybe from Lemberg which was the capital city of the area where I was from.

Do you remember anything about the types of shows that they would put on?

Well, they had a show I remember it was called Mississippi.

Mississippi.

Yes. They had Kuni Leml. Kuni Leml was a Jewish comedy. When Mississippi, it showed I think The Mississippi was a Jewish version of the-- what is that show that's called where the old man river is in it?

Swanee? Or--

Old man river, he must know something but he don't say nothing. I don't know so that's--

Was it was about America?

That's right. That's right. And they named it. But here it had a different--

Well, were any of the shows political in nature or did they discuss Zionist themes, anything like that, or were they

primarily--

They had speakers once in a while about Zionism.

I see. But it was never in the sense of political that pertained to the country where we lived in.

Do you remember whether any of the speakers were socialists or spoke about socialist ideas?

Maybe they have, but I don't remember any.

You don't recall that.

No.

You said that there were two movie theaters. Did you ever go to the movies too.

Yeah, I used to go once in a while. Sometimes I would be let in free. As a matter of fact, one movie theater was right across the street from where we lived. So I knew the people. So once in a while, they would let me in to see, watch the show for free.

Were these primarily American movies that you saw or--

Primarily they had American movies, yes.

There was some Polish movies too, but basically they had mostly American films.

Did you spend any time going to museums or concerts or anything like that?

I don't remember being in a museum in my hometown, not even once.

OK.

I've never seen a museum there.

How about concerts? Did you attend any concerts?

Concerts? The first time I listened to a concert, well a marching band I heard once or twice, a few times marching band, military marching band. The first time I heard a symphonic concert was after the Russians came in. They gave a free concert. It was the first time I listened to quite a few violins playing together.

I see.

Yeah. At that time I was what? About 17 years old.

Were there any singing societies who gave concerts before the war that you attended?

Just in school they had choirs, school choirs. But otherwise, I don't remember any.

Well, were there any other types of entertainment that you remember when you were younger, or sports, or anything like that you were involved with?

Well, they had sports. They had teams. They played soccer.

Were you involved?

I used to play soccer with other kids.

Was this organized in any way by any organization?

No, just got a group of guys together, 11 guys playing against another 11 guys, and they got two teams. And you play.

That was it. OK.

Yeah.

You mark the goal marks with a stone on one side and a stone on the other side and you kick the ball in the middle.

Right. Do you recall whether your family ever went on a vacation?

My father on a vacation or my mother? Never. One time my mother had a sick uncle somewhere, and she went somewhere to help him out. And that was the only time I know that she ever went away.

Did you ever travel before the war? Did you ever leave Boryslaw?

No. I never traveled. I didn't have the money to travel. And I don't know where I would have traveled anyway at that time.

What do you remember about yourself before the war? What type of person were you like? Do you recall? How would you describe yourself?

How I would describe myself?

Well, for example, what did you look like at that time? I think I looked pretty good.

OK. I suppose most of the kids, you have fantasies. What do you want to be when you grow up? Of course, none of these things worked out.

Well, were you healthy? Were you--

I was healthy. I was athletic. I used to wrestle for fun.

What were some of your dreams about what you wanted to do with yourself?

What I wanted to be?

Yeah.

I wanted to be a detective or a policeman, or an actor.

Or an actor?

Yeah, sure. That was the nicest things to do.

Did you ever get a chance to do any of that before the war?

Well, I did some amateur acting a few times.

In what context? Was it with an organization?

With the organization, they put on some shows. Was that that Akiba organization you were telling me about?

Yeah, I did one show over there, yeah, with them one time. Nothing great.

Did you have any other hobbies or interests before the war besides the acting?

Hobbies? I can't think of a hobby. I like music. I like to listen to music.

What type of music?

Like I said, there was a movie theater across the street from where I lived. And they had a loudspeaker in the front of the theater. In other words, the whole sound, the sound part of the movie, you could hear outside. We would just be standing and listening to that for hours, to the music or the dialogue. And if it was English, of course, I didn't understand at the time.

But people would just hang around and just listen. Because very few people had a radio. Very few people had a record player. I never had a radio in Europe. I never had a record player.

What was your outlook on life before the war? Were you fairly optimistic?

Before the war?

Yeah, were you fairly optimistic about what was going to happen to you or--

I just didn't think what was going to happen. I was just thinking, at the time I was just taking every day as it came.

But you had certain dreams such as becoming an actor or something like that.

Well, I wanted to be. But it was not something that I thought I'll ever pursue because the circumstances were not such in my hometown. They called where I am from, they called Boryslaw the end of the world.

Oh, why was that?

You know what they called it the end of the world? Because the train used to come in to our city, but it did not continue.

End of the line.

It went right back out.

See, there was no continuation. That was the end of the line. If you wanted to continue, you had to go either by bus, or by horse, or some other means of transportation. So they called it the end of the world.

I see. Did you think of yourself before the war as being a brave person or a sensitive person?

A sensitive person. I still think I'm sensitive today. Brave? Sometimes I may think I'm brave, and sometimes I'm not brave. It depends on the situation.

Are there any particular memories that stick out in your mind from your childhood, significant things that happened, anything particularly joyful or particularly tragic from that time?

Some things that I can't forget, there was one time, you see I used to go to school from 8:00 till 1:00 from 8 o'clock in the morning till 1:00. Then I would go home. And I would have lunch where there was some soup or something. Then I would go to cheder which is the Jewish religious school from 2 o'clock till 7 o'clock at night.

So I went home one time and my father asked me, are you going to cheder pretty soon? It was about 1:30 or so. I said, yes. Would you give me a couple of cents, two cents is enough to buy two pieces of candy, hard candy. So my father gave me the two cents to buy some hard candy.

On the way to cheder, I saw my mother. She says, are you going to cheder. I said, yes. I said to her give me some money for some candy. She asked me, didn't father give you any? And I said no. And she gave me another two cents. And to this day, I can't forget this that I lied to her. I got the two extra cents for the two more pieces of candy.

And I never told her. And I never straightened it out with her. And every once in a while, it comes back to me.

So it was very unusual for you two to lie to them like that?

I felt guilty. Even now I feel bad about it. Because you asked me if I'd think about something.

So that's something that has stayed with you.

I suppose everybody has little things like that.

Sure.

Let's talk about what school was like for you. You went to the regular public school in the morning, you said.

Yes.

What was that like? At what age did you start going to school? Do you remember? We started at the age of six, six years old.

And what type of subjects did you study in school?

Well, there was Polish. In the second grade we started a second language which was Ukrainian, because the population in that area was Ukrainian. So there were quite a large percentage of people. Of course, they didn't call them Ukrainian. They called them Russians. But there was a Ukrainian language.

So at the second grade, we started already a second language. It's similar to Russian. Then we learned Polish. There was Ukrainian, mathematics, geography. What is that called-- what do they call it?

Biology?

Biology. About botany, history.

Did you enjoy going to school? Was it something that you looked forward to?

I wasn't crazy about going to school because the teachers were not quite dedicated in teaching you. If you had somebody at home that helped you with your homework, that was good. But just in school, they did not concentrate on teaching you. With me, it was difficult because my mother and father were not quite literate in the Polish language. And I couldn't count on help from them.

I see.

So that was tough for me at that point.

Were your classmates Jews and Poles?

They were Jews, Poles, Ukrainians. Yeah.

So it was all mixed.

Different people.

Was it a large school, were there many students in the school?

Yeah. It was a large school. They had in the city, I think they had about two or three schools, that's all. So it was quite a quite a lot of people.

And how long did you go until what age did you go to public school?

I went to school till the age of 16.

I see.

So and by that time, that's when the Second World War broke out.

What about the cheder, what was that like?

The cheder, we learned every-- we went through every year, we learned the Bible all over again. Next year, we went through the same thing, learned the Bible all over again.

And you learned your Hebrew in the cheder.

Hebrew, yeah. Not speaking, a little bit writing, but I never learned to speak Hebrew. I learned to pray in Hebrew, but never to speak it.

I see.

And was there a separate schoolhouse for the cheder or did you meet in someone's home?

No. They had a special building for the cheder.

I see.

Yeah.

And were there many students?

Yeah there were, that was the only one in town. So all the Jewish people, the children, went to that cheder.

The Jews who lived in your town, were they all primarily Orthodox or were they observant Jews? I would say about 80% were Orthodox, observant Jews.

Yeah. Can you tell us anything else about the Jewish community in the town at all?

Well, they had the group, the Jewish group that they call Hasidim. They used to dress in black, even some of them wore white socks with the black their special dress, the way they did. And it was nothing unusual. This was the way of life over there.

Were there any active political parties that Jews were involved in, in any way?

To the best of my knowledge there were some involved with the Zionist movement. But still, I was at my age at that time, I didn't know that much about it.

How about the friends that you grew up with? Did you have any non-Jewish friends?

I had a few non-Jewish friends. I had a few Jewish friends. And I knew quite a few guys, neighbors of mine.

How did you get along with these people?

I got along very nicely.

Were you a fairly social person?

Yes, I was pretty social, didn't get big crowds around me. But I got along pretty well with everybody.

Well before the war, do you remember any incidents of antisemitism at all in your town?

I don't remember any incidence of antisemitism in our hometown. Here, I heard a few times in school, the teacher called a Jewish kid a dirty Jew. Maybe two or three times I heard that.

Did it ever happened to you?

No, not to me personally.

Were you there when it happened though?

Yes. Yes.

Well, how did you feel when that happened?

Well I felt bad about it, of course. But it never personally was done to me.

So you seem to be saying that you were not confronted with antisemitism a great deal before the war.

You mean, no. No, not in my home town. No.

Were you aware of it elsewhere in Poland?

I heard that in some cities they had it in the newspapers. I heard. My father would read the newspapers. He would say things that went on here and there in some city. But I personally didn't come up with it.

You didn't run into it from your neighbors or your friends or anything like that?

No. No.

So I take it there was most likely there was no Jewish organized activity to fight antisemitism in your town.

No. Thinking about it now, I don't think at that time in my home town it wasn't necessary, because I don't remember seeing anything.

Before the war, were there any anti-Jewish laws passed by the government that affected the Jews in your town?

I don't think any anti-Jewish laws were passed. I remember there was a case. I heard that some, they got up in a Polish Senate or Congress. They tried to outlaw the kosher butchering. They tried to outlaw the kosher butchering. But I don't

think it ever went through. It never materialized.

The kosher butcher in your town, you mean?

In all Poland.

In all of Poland?

Poland.

I see. This was something that your father read in the paper?

Not my father read. I heard people talk about it, people that were discussing and so on. But I don't think it materialized.

So you seem to be saying that before the war you were not preoccupied with antisemitism.

No.

Or had any fear about being Jewish.

No.

Was there any fear created by what your father read in the paper about other parts of Poland? Did that cause any anxiety to you?

Not that much about other parts of Poland. But I heard them talk about reading the paper, the Jewish paper, about things that went on in Germany.

I see.

He used to say this went on and that went on.

And was he fearful that was going to come to Poland?

Well, just like a lot of other people, what he was reading in the paper he didn't believe that was true.

Was there a feeling that living in Boryslaw at as you call it the end of the world, that you would be just too far away from all this to affect you?

Well, nobody thought of that either. You know it was something that was happening someplace else. Who knew that Hitler was going to come into Poland or to Boryslaw, right? Nobody knew that. But just to read what went on somewhere else, they used to say, well, what a pity, what a pity. People were saying what a pity this is happening. But then they said, it's unbelievable. It just can't happen. People just didn't believe it.

You weren't aware of any organized efforts in your town to help Jews in Germany or anything like that?

Well, no. We were, as far as I know most of the Jewish people were poor people. There was no, number one, you would try to help yourself first, before you can help somebody else. My father, he could have given somebody maybe enough to buy himself maybe a piece of bread. That's as much as he could do.

I see.

Because like I said, he didn't have much. When my father worked, and it came Friday night when I saw what was Friday night on the table, I knew whether my father had a good week or a bad week.

I see.

When there was a white challah, a white bread with a piece of fish and some chicken, I knew my father had a good week.

OK.

And when sometimes there was black bread, and no chicken, and some plain food, I knew he didn't have a good week. He didn't make enough. Because right away, what he made, it reflected itself on the food on the table.

OK. Why don't we take a short break here? And when we come back, we'll talk about what happened to you when the war began.

OK.