

OK. You can start.

My name is Aaron Elster. I was born February 4, 1933, in a town called Sokolow-Podlaski in Poland. The town had a population of approximately 12 to 14,000 people.

It was heavily populated with Jewish people. There were approximately 6 to 7,000 Jews living in the town. There were two synagogues in the town. There was quite a few business people in the town.

My parents owned a butcher shop and both worked in the butcher shop. Most of our business was done with the Gentiles in the area, in the surrounding areas of the town. I remember we used to deal with, or sell meats to farmers who we used to come into town on Thursdays.

At that time, I guess we called it treyf, because that's the type of meat it was. It was not kosher. It was not for the Jewish people in the town. So we used to deal mostly with the Gentiles.

Probably that's one of the reasons we had contact, or a greater amount of contact, with the Polish people around the area. That probably was the reason for my sister and my survival.

My earliest recollection of the city, of the town probably was right around 1939 when the war started. I remember sitting in cheder. The bombs came. We all went out of cheder and went to the farms in the woods to escape the bombs.

So you were about six years old then?

Probably six to seven years old. I did not attend public school at the time. Because I think at that time, we started public school at age six. I attended cheder. On the second floor of our building was a cheder.

My uncle, with a red beard, was what they called the Melamed, or the rabbi. I remember distinctly if you didn't behave, he had no problem grabbing you by the ear and throwing you out of the room and down the stairs. Those are my some of my recollections of the town.

I don't know whether we're affluent or poor. I had no way of measuring. I always had what we needed, what we wanted. In fact, as a kid, they used to call me the [POLISH] because I was so skinny.

I refused to eat. I didn't like to eat. I remember my mother used to bribe me in order for me to eat.

Conflicts arose, even at that time. Because in Hebrew school, I used to learn about heaven and hell and damnation. At 6, 7 years old, I used to have nightmares about going to hell if I didn't behave or I didn't do the right thing.

I remember my mother used to take me in the backyard and give me some Polish sausage to eat, which was not kosher. These were conflicts at that time, which is amazing. I still remember those things.

My father was sort of a quiet person. I didn't know too many of his relatives, because I was named after my grandfather, Nachman Aron. My sister was named after our grandmother, Ita Jasper. Naturally, her name in English is Irene. So they died at a fairly young age, I would imagine.

I had an uncle that was a fairly religious person. My father came from that area. But my mother came from sort of a more of a rowdy group. In fact, my grandparents, this is my grandfather, my grandfather, my grandmother, and one of my mother's sisters.

There were 12 children in that household. I suppose that at that time, if you wanted to eat and you sat around the table, whoever grabbed first would get the most. I think this is the type of atmosphere my mother grew up in.

In my eyes, my mother was a very beautiful woman. From the stories that I can remember, she really didn't want to

marry my father because he was sort of a, I don't know, religious type, sort of quiet. She was considered a beautiful woman, from what I could recall.

So she was the businesswoman in the household. She actually made all the deals and did all the shopping and buying and selling. Those are my recollections of my parents, my father, very gentle, quiet man, and my mother, the more outgoing and frivolous type of person.

I had two sisters. My younger sister's name was Sarah. In fact, I named my granddaughter after her. She went to Treblinka, where that at the time of liquidation, she probably was about five, six years old.

I remember the circumstances under which she went there. Perhaps we'll touch on it. I also have an older sister who's alive, lives here in the United States. Her name is Irene Budkowski. She has four grandchildren. She's a very happy grandmother. We have a very close relationship, because she lives near me in Skokie.

There is not much that I really recall before the war, because I was too young. I was born in '33. The war started in 1939.

But I do recall between '39 and '41, before it really got bad, before they created the ghetto, and we couldn't mingle with people, I remember going to cheder. I remember going to the marketplaces. I remember doing all kinds of things that a child my age would do.

Even when the Germans first came in, I didn't necessarily feel the brunt of what was happening. Perhaps I didn't have a full understanding of what was happening at the time. But I had what to eat.

My freedom was within my block area. I had no need to go on the outside. So the ghetto did not represent any problems for me.

I had a few uncles that were maybe 6, 8, 10 years older than I was. I remember them making toys for us in exchange for food. I would be very happy to give them my food, because I didn't like to eat. They would make me toys.

Our household was fairly normal. Even during the first couple of years between 1939 to '41, my parents were busy in the shop. In fact, we were taken care of by a woman in the house. My sister, we used to get involved with the shop.

Then when they created the ghetto, it was very difficult to get out. But our business depended on the Gentiles. I remember the Polish police coming to our house for their meats, even the Volksdeutsche. Volksdeutsche--

The German police.

German police. There were Polish living on the German border. They claimed to be Germans. So they were called Volksdeutsche.

There was one very mean person by the name of Lolek. He was very tall. I remember his blue steel helmet coming to the house. These were all payoffs in order to stay in business. But that's the way business was done.

We as kids used to sneak out of the ghetto and deliver meats to customers. My sister more so than me. As a boy, I'm always afraid that it's much easier to tell a boy that you're Jewish than a girl.

Were you wearing the gold star just yet?

I don't believe that I wore it. But I think my sister had to wear it. Because up to a certain age, I believe it was either 12 or 14, you had to start wearing a star or an armband.

Right.

So I don't believe I ever wore it.

So you used to sneak out of the ghetto?

We used to sneak out at fairly regular intervals and come back. At the gates where the ghetto was, there was a Jewish policeman. There was a Polish policeman there. Traffic was fairly easily-- you can pretty well, especially if you knew the people.

The ghetto wall was here. Our shop was about, maybe, 30 yards from the ghetto wall. There was a gate there that would go up and down when traffic would come and go.

I remember the candy store. I remember the drugstore, which was part of the ghetto. Things didn't get bad for a few years.

Then you started noticing it. I remember they used to have selections. They used to have to deliver so many people to help build the camp. In fact, the townspeople from our camp were put into forced labor to build Treblinka, or help build Treblinka.

Treblinka was probably no more than 20 miles away from our town. The people that were taken to Treblinka to work in the camps, nobody ever came back.

How did you feel at that time as a child?

One of the things I've never been able to justify in my own mind, why I was so mature at that age. It's always astounded me. In '41, I couldn't have been, what, '33, '41, nine years old or something like that, even in '42 at nine years old, I felt I had the maturity of a 20, 25-year-old.

I remember Jewish people used to gather in our home and talk about the bad times that were coming up. In fact, I come from a town that everybody had a nickname, you know. Nobody went by their last name. Everybody had some kind of name. It was an indication of who he was.

When the German Jews were chased out of Germany, there was some Jews that came to our town. The only thing I remember about him, they used to call him [NON-ENGLISH]. That was his name, [NON-ENGLISH] the German.

Which means, the big guy?

No, the [NON-ENGLISH] German.

The [NON-ENGLISH] means German.

[NON-ENGLISH] that was his Jewish name.

I see.

He lived in back of our house. He used to come into the house, and there would be six, seven people sitting around, talking about what was going on, how the Germans were killing Jews. I used to listen in to these conversations.

I was always afraid of what's going to happen to us and always prayed or tried to pray, pray to God that He would somehow spare me. But then in my own mind, I would say to myself, why would God want to spare me out of all the thousands of children that probably were more pious than I was.

I remember these emotions were very strong emotions. I was always afraid, not so much of dying, but the pain of death because of the description of what they used to do to the Jewish people. I had such full understanding of what was going on and what had to be done and such fears of what was going to happen to all of us.

Yet none of the people had any answers. Nobody knew what to do. Everybody was relying on God to help them. I think that was one of our downfalls.

I believe one of the traditional things that Jewish people were brought up with, if somebody hits you on one side of the cheek, give him the other side of the cheek. I saw people go to the trains when the liquidation started in our place, hollering [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], and God will help us, and so on. But I've had that conflict ever since I was a child and asked the question, if there is such a thing as God, how can He allow that?

Then you find yourself, when you're in need, you're still praying to God. So it's a dichotomy. I don't know how to resolve that. I've never been able to resolve that.

I find myself, when I'm in need, I still pray to God. Then most of the time, I question. I question His existence, His motives, His designs, His plans.

If people sinned or they committed sins and they deserve to die, what about the children? How can a child be sinful? How can a child be involved in something that should be done, you know, such terrible things should be done to them? I've really never been able to resolve it.

But anyway, life continued on that basis. During the ghetto times, I saw what was going on, but I don't think I felt it. Because I didn't have it bad.

I remember my relatives had it worse than we did. For some odd reason, because of my parents' affiliation with the people, the type of business they were in, I remember they used to smuggle in beef cows into the barn, the back of the house. They used to slaughter them. The black market was going on.

The ghetto was comprised of brick walls. Also, in the fields, there was barbed wire. They used to cut the barbed wire, or lift the barbed wire, or have special interests as they bring cows in. We used to slaughter them in the barns and sell the meat. So there was a commerce going on, continuously some kind of commerce going on.

There were also, believe it or not, almost like a mafia in the town. Where you would have to pay protection money in order to do business. If you remember, I mentioned that name Lolek, which was the Volksdeutsche. I remember him coming to the house one day. It must have been 2:00, 3:00 in the morning, dragged my father out of bed.

In Poland, we used to have apartment buildings with the hallway. The doors would close. There was, like, a 2 by 4 that were used to guard the door.

He took that 2 by 4 and proceeded to beat my dad with it. Broke his arm. Because I remember after that that he was walking around with a sling for a long time. Because apparently, he didn't pay off at the right time or whatever the situation was. But people existed.

I don't know if you know what the word [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] means. In Polish, it's like a [NON-ENGLISH], a person who owns a large farm that has a lot of people working for them. I don't know. What would you relate that to?

A landlord?

A landlord, a landowner, he used to have-- yes, that's the word. Because of our connection with these people, they were allowed to take 30, 40 Jews and bring to their farms and have them work the farms. Naturally, the Jews would pay off, pay them to let them go there.

This must have been around 1942 when things were getting bad. We were taken to that farm, my sister, myself, my mother and dad.

Both sisters?

No. I lost my thought. My second, my little sister, both sisters at that time, yes, yes, because that was before the first liquidation. We'd stay there for months to be out of the ghetto. These people would have the right to take Jewish labor.

But before the holidays, everybody wanted to go home to celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This was in 1942. So the whole family except my sister-- my big sister stayed on the farm.

My mom and dad wanted to come back. My little sister apparently was homesick, she wanted to come back, and they brought me back to the ghetto. I remember this was Motzei Yom Kippur, which would be the day right after Atonement, the night.

My parents woke me up in the middle of the night. They said that they're taking all the Jewish people out of the ghetto and they're sending them to Treblinka. We have to hide.

In that building, we had a double wall on the attic. So the whole building with their children and all went into that double wall. I was there, my little sister, my mom and my dad, and many other people. All we heard was shooting and screaming.

We stayed there the night and the next day. By that time, shooting was going on all day and all night. What they were doing is they were gathering the Jewish people.

Some they would put right in the back. There was one mass grave. They shot them and dumped them into the grave. The others were marched up to the marketplace. From there, they were trucked to the train station to Treblinka.

There must have been 40, 50 people in that room. There were little children. Then children started to cry.

I remember the adults saying to keep those children quiet.

I believe one of the children was smothered by their parents so the other people would not be found out. That was my first experience of parents doing or not doing for their children.

A parent says, gee, I would die for my own child. If it was a question of choice between my child and myself, I will die for my child. But I wonder if these people were ever faced with that choice in reality, whether they would really make that decision.

Even those parents might have made it if it were only themselves.

Maybe.

But there was a whole group of people.

Maybe. Anyway. The noise apparently attracted the police. I was by the wall. They started shooting into that room. A piece of wood hit me right here, the splinter from bullets coming in hit me right here.

Then they lifted the door, the secret door, and they started shooting down and says, come on out, you know. So we were all dragged out of that hiding place and lined up on the sidewalk on the street against the walls. That was my first experience to see the Ukrainians doing the dirty work for the Germans.

They were meaner at times than the Germans. My mother got separated from us. My little sister and myself and my father were standing together.

I believe my mother was pulled away to do work. They separated people. They separated the men, the women.

There was an old woman, one of our neighbors who must have been 75 years old. She couldn't keep up with it. They put

her down on the floor and they kicked her to death, just like a piece of garbage.

I remember the fear at that time. I don't know if I can recreate that type of fear. But the fear of being shot, the pain, those kind of pain, the pain kept on bothering me, the fear of being shot and dying and maybe suffering.

At that time, I was praying to God why don't you just end the whole thing? Why don't you just swallow up everybody, us and them? And questioning why, why, why is this happening to me or to us?

They marched us up to the marketplace. There was a German or SS man sitting in the middle of the marketplace with a machine gun. They set us around in a square.

I was crying and praying and wondering. I didn't want to die. I just didn't want to die.

I remember my little sister sitting here. When we went into the hiding place, I guess they grabbed some food. So she had a handkerchief full of dried farfel, what would that be?

Grain, it's a grain, farfel.

Sitting and holding onto that, and my dad is sitting next to me. I don't know exactly what I was saying to him. I don't remember exactly what I was saying to him. But he says, why don't you run?

I was thinking to myself, because I knew. I knew the pain. I knew what was going on. There was no question in my mind.

I've heard about the crematoriums. I've heard about all the suffering and the punishment and everything that was going on.

You'd heard about it? At that time--

At that time.

--you had heard about it.

I felt that if I'm going to die, maybe if they shoot me it won't be so bad. So I mean, I'll run. Not that I was counting on them shooting me. I was counting on hopefully escaping.

The marketplace, it's a square. At the end of the marketplace, there's a gutter where the water used to run down. There were open gutters there.

When the rain would come down, the water would run down an open gutter. So I crawled on my hands and knees to the gutter. I made my way in the gutter to the end of the marketplace where I was not visible anymore from the marketplace. I stood up and started running.

Now whether they saw me or figured where is he going to go because the ghetto was all surrounded, or whether they didn't see me, I have no idea. I ran for about two blocks.

I knew my uncle had a house there. There was nobody left to speak of, because we were the last people to be liquidated. I ran into his house.

His house was at the end of the ghetto. There was barbed wire on the other side where the yard was. I ran into his basement. My aunt and her daughter were sitting in the basement.

We stayed there overnight. I figured out that they're going to come back. They're going to search the place. This is no place to stay. I said to them, let's run. Let's get out of here. They wouldn't go.

So I decided I would go. Because I knew where I was going to go. Remember, I told you about this landlord on the farm.

Right.

It was called [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]. We figured any survivors would go over there. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] must have been, I don't know, 10, 12 miles away from our town.

So I ran in the backyard. There was a Polish woman on the other side of the barbed wire. In Polish, she says, come on, Jew. There's nobody watching. In other words, there was no guard at the barbed wire.

So I went under the barbed wire, got into the free zone. I just kept running. For some odd reason, I knew where to go. I went back to [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

My father escaped. He was there. There must have been about a dozen Jewish people that made it out of the town. That was the first liquidation.

There's Kleenex, if you need.

No, it's OK.

I didn't tell you about my sister during all this time. My mother made a deal with a Polish woman by the name of Gurski to hide my sister. And she gave her, I don't know exactly what she gave her. She gave her whatever she could or she had.

Also, if you remember, I told you my mother was separated from us. She was put to work gathering all the Jewish belongings and packing them in crates and shipping them to Germany. So apparently, she must have found some jewelry or whatever valuables there was.

She gave it to that woman to hide my sister. My sister never came back. She was still on that farm.

Yes.

So my mother survived the first liquidation. My father met up with me in the farm. Then we figured it was done. They always said they're always going to leave some Jews to work. They're not going to kill everybody.

So my father and I went back into the town with my sister. My mother turned my sister over to Mrs. Gurski on [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

I don't know why or how, but my mother and dad were not living together at that time. He was staying someplace else. She was staying someplace else. I was staying with my mother for that time.

At this point, when you say your sister, do you mean the older of your two?

The older.

My little sister went to Treblinka.

My mother took me for a walk to show me where my sister was hiding because the ghetto was gone. So we had some kind of mobility. We were able to move around. So she took me and pointed out the house where my sister was hiding.

We must have stayed together in Sokolow probably for a couple of months doing whatever work they want him to do.

You and your mother?

My mother. Then there was another man that stayed with us, too. I don't know what happened to my dad after that.

I would say about December, probably around December or January, they came to liquidate the remaining Jews from the ghetto that they used for labor. For some odd reason, my mother got wind of that. And myself, my mom, and that man, we started running.

We ran into the farms. I remember the first night. We were out in the forest. My mother went into one of the farmhouses. We knew the people. She knew the people.

She went in there. She was in the house for quite a long time. I was standing outside with this other man.

I think I somewhat resented him because I really didn't know exactly what was transpiring, why my dad wasn't here, why this man was there.

Mhm.

But she came out from the house, or barn, or whatever it was. Sometimes they used to have a barn that served as a house and a barn at the same time. She handed me some earrings and some other small jewelry. She said to me that I should go and see if Mrs. Gurski will take me in.

I don't know exactly what transpired at that time. I don't remember exactly the words that were spoken. But I wasn't sure whether she was telling me to go there, or whether she was telling me to try to make it on my own because we couldn't make it together. Some odd reason, I felt abandoned, or that I was being abandoned at that time. In my own mind, I felt that perhaps she felt that either I would have a better chance on my own, or she would have a better chance without a kid hanging around.

There's something else that transpired right at that time I'm having trouble articulating at this point. It was cold. It was winter outside.

I was afraid to go back to the town. I knew or I felt that how am I going to make it there, and why is she going to take me in, and so on. So I tried to make it on my own. I remember going into one farmhouse and begging them to let me stay.

I handed over whatever I had to them. They put me down in the basement. They gave me something to eat. Two, three hours later, they came. They asked me to come up.

They says they're afraid to hide me. Because if the Germans found out that they hid a Jew, they would kill them. They would burn their house. And they would absolutely kill them.

The problem was if the Germans would have caught me and beat me and asked me who was helping me, there's a likely possibility, and I was afraid of that, that I would say who was hiding me. The question was whether the Polacks were going to kill me to prevent that or let me go. That's the reality, because those things were happening.

I was getting sick at the time. Because I remember I was wearing my sister's coat. It's a long beige coat that I was wearing, and I had short pants on. This is already probably February, because that's how I chose my birthday. They were encouraging me to give myself up because I had no future.

You say they. Who were they?

The Polish.

OK.

And I didn't want to do that. So for the next couple of days, I was just hanging around hiding out in the farms.

Did they give you back your jewelry?

They gave me back my jewelry. Yes. Probably was worth two cents at that time, but they gave it back to me. Because I think they were afraid to have anything to do with it.

I remember hiding out in barns at night and stealing some food during the morning hours. I was getting sick. I thought that I would go back to the town and try to see whether the Gurski would take me in. I remember walking back in town, walking back into the ghetto because there wasn't a soul there.

Went into one of the houses, just lay down on the floor and went to sleep. By the time I turned around, it was morning. I was supposed to get up earlier before. But it was already light outside.

If you were to ask me to explain how I made it over to the Gurskis without too many people seeing me, recognizing me, or turning me in, I can't. I can't explain that.

But I remember getting over to the Gurski's house. Mr. Gurski was just coming down the stairs to go to church. He was a very, very religious man. At 6:00 in the morning, he would go to church every morning. He was a retired railroad person.

And I remember standing in that hallway and talking, asking, pleading, begging Mrs. Gurski to take me in.

Did you speak good Polish?

I thought I did. I thought I did.

So you remember asking her to take you in?

Yes, crying, pleading, and telling her that my mother said that my sister was here. She says your sister is not here. Go away.

I wouldn't move. Because the next place would have been the police station, which was about a block away. Apparently my tears, my begging, my condition probably got to her. She says, OK. You can come up. You can stay here for a couple of days. And then you got to go.

So she let me up into her attic. I stayed in the attic for a few days. She wouldn't admit that my sister was there.

I don't know what I had. Maybe the flu, maybe some kind of-- she was afraid to come near me. But she would throw some food in for me here and there. Probably on the third or fourth day, my sister came into the attic to wash me up.

I was the unwelcome guest. I was a thorn in their side. I was a consumer of food that they didn't have. I was a threat to their safety.

I was even a threat to my sister's safety. Because a woman can be hidden much easier than a man or a boy. That was one of the problems. All they had to do is pull your pants down and boom, they knew.

That's right. You mean, circumcision was a dead giveaway.

Absolutely, absolutely.

For Jewish men.

All Jews were circumcised.

Of course. And Gentiles in that time, most of them were not circumcised.

That's right.

I had my reunion with my sister in the attic. I remember she brought in a pail full of water. I was so full of lice, you wouldn't believe it. I probably had been in the same clothes for six months.

She brought me something to eat. They all wanted me to leave and kept on insisting--

She also wanted you to leave?

No, not her. But they were making her. They were giving her a hard time because of me. Because of me, they felt that I would ruin everything for my sister.

You were a greater risk, as you put it.

I was a much greater risk. I was an unwelcome party. I was not part of the deal. OK? I came in and upset the whole apple cart.

I don't think I concerned myself with that. I concerned myself more with trying to survive. I wanted to stay and I begged them to let me stay.

Well, she agreed to let me stay. I don't know whether she agreed to let me stay, but she didn't physically throw me out. They wouldn't talk to me. The husband never talked to me.

I think future viewers should know that the reprisals against Poles who helped Jews, even in the smallest way, was savage.

Absolutely. If the Germans would have found us there, there's no question they would have absolutely killed them, burned their house, or maybe killed their relatives if they had any.

They did not have any children. It was just the two of them. She used to live upstairs. She used to rent out the two first floor apartments. One was a schoolteacher living downstairs. The other one was a German living downstairs, working for the German government in there.

And if you know the configuration of an attic, it's like a tepee, slanted down. Her apartment was square. Then on the sides, that's where I crawled in.

They put some straw in there for me, got me some, I don't know what, some blanket or something. That's where I stayed. Never saw the inside of the house, never been inside the apartment, didn't even know what it looked like.

My sister would bring in some food for me once a day. I would sit there and play with the lice and kill them.

Nothing to read, nothing to do, nothing.

Nothing to read except the fear of dying, except the fear of the loss of my parents, the fear of being alone, the fear of being found out. The fear that they're going to throw us out, and the hunger, the hunger.

I was so preoccupied thinking about food.

I used to sneak out in that hallway, so to speak. She used to feed the pigs. She used to have a trough which she used to throw in the rotten potatoes and everything and mash them all up.

You wouldn't know what else they put in there. They used to pee in there also. Mash it all up. It was good for the pigs. I used to sneak out and take a handful of that stuff and gorge myself with it.

Always wondering, what would it be like to be full? What kind of feeling is that to be full, to really be able to walk away from a table saying I had enough to eat. I didn't know that those things existed. Couldn't picture that. I couldn't believe that that could happen.

Thinking of your old nickname.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

I remember as a kid they used to call me [POLISH] because I used to refuse to eat. I was so skinny.

But the time didn't go very fast. I was cold. I came in there during the wintertime. It was an open attic, it was just a plain old attic with dirt on the floor. I used to have nothing to do, nobody to talk to, and just sit there, sit there.

They were constantly mad at me. Mrs. Gurski was always mad at me because I was a pain. I used to feel guilty about that. Yet, I wanted to live.

I mean, he would go down every morning. He would go down to church. He would go to church, go down the stairs. I would be able to look out through the cracks in the walls. I'd be able to see certain things.

In fact, the only time I'd be able to make some noise is when it was raining outside. The roof on the attic was made out of tin sheets. The pounding of the rain would allow me to scream and allow me to just scream and holler and do all kinds of commotions.

How interesting, to hear your own voice.

Yes. Because the noise, it was deafening, the rain hitting against the panels. I stayed on that attic for close to two years.

Amazing. Now that I think about it, I never had a bath, never brushed my teeth.

It was solitary confinement, solitary confinement.

Never had any human contact. The only contact I had is I pried open, where the roof would meet the tin plates, I pried open a little spot so I'd be able to look down in the backyard.

I remember seeing a little girl, the tenants down there. I remember seeing her eating strawberries and sour cream. I'll never forget that. I'll never forget that. She must have been about 4, 5, 6 years old.

That was my total exposure to the outside world. She would come in sometimes and give us bad news that the Russians are losing and the Russians, they're in Moscow, or near Moscow. This thing is never going to end. You people are a curse to me, and blah, blah, all that type of stuff.

You know, if I throw you out, you're only going to go to the Germans and tell them who hid you. Him? Never even spoke to him once. Her I used to have some contact with, because I used to have a pail to go to the washroom. So she used to have to take the pail out at night.

That went on till the Russians came and they attacked the town. It was one of my glory days. Before the Russians came closer to the town of Sokolow, the Germans, they had more Germans come in to the front lines.

So they occupied the apartments downstairs. They threw the tenants out and they took over the apartments downstairs. And I was in the attic, OK?

One night one of those guys got drunk, walked up the stairs.

A German?

The German, yeah, and started knocking on the door to the attic. I'm in there, all alone. Mrs. Gurski came out. Wanted to know what, he lost his way or whatever.

When the Russians started bombing, the bombing was so intense that the Germans all left. A bomb hit, about, I don't know, 20 feet away from where that house was and it tore the roof off. So here I'm sitting on the attic, looking up at the stars, bombs all over. The skies are red, you know. I'm having a ball.

My sister and I ran downstairs. The Germans left all kinds of bread. Would you know what the German hard bread was?

Yeah,

OK?

And marmalade?

Sure.

I'm laying against a wall, eating bread and marmalade. And the bombs are coming down. I figured, well, this is it. Right? We're free.

So now the bombing stops. The Germans are still there. The Russians are advancing. I haven't got an attic to go to.

So she had a, little what they call a pralnia, which is a place where she used to wash the clothes for and the tenants. She used to take in clothes to wash. Next to it was, like, a chicken coop with a little door in there.

I went into the chicken coop. I stayed in the chicken coop, laid down on top of, like, a little rafter. Because we were still afraid to be discovered. OK?

The Russians were entering. The Germans were leaving. She was afraid to let anybody know that we were there because the Polacks would have killed us.

We were there for about eight days after the Russians came into town because she didn't know what to do with us. Finally, some survivors started showing up. There must have been about 20, 22 people that survived from hiding in the woods, hiding--

Like you.

--Polish people, and various means. So when she found-- there was two families. One was called Rafalowich and one was Greenberg. They went to Israel. Mrs. Rafalowich came with Mrs. Gurski to look at us.

I must have weighed about, I don't know, 50, 60 pounds. I couldn't walk. I was so weak, I couldn't walk.

So they took me with them to the Jewish quarter. We were all living in one building where the ghetto was. At that time, I met up with a Russian major who took me under his wing.

So this was liberation for you?

This was the liberation for us. That's right. She was afraid to let us go because she didn't know what was going to happen.

Which way the wind would blow.

The Polish people were not too kindly to the survivors.

We do know. In fact, we heard that.

Out of the survivors that went back to some of the farms to reclaim their properties, they killed them.

Murdered.

They murdered them right after the war. Here I am. I'm free with no place to go, no relatives. There's maybe a total of 20 people there, maybe six, seven families, some disjointed families, some single people, some this. They're sending me around from home to home. Each day I would go eat in a different place.

But the Russian major took me under his wing initially and took me to his barracks. They fed me. I haven't eaten.

In years.

Sorry to say this, but I think had the runs for two weeks till my system normalized.

Of course.

Now he was going to send me to Moscow, to Russia, to go to school and all that. Sounded all great to me because I wanted to go someplace. I couldn't stay there.

Did you know, at this point, anything about the fate of your parents?

Oh, I assumed I knew. Oh, my parents. Do you know that my mother survived till three months before the liberation?

I didn't. Oh, my.

Yeah, yeah. I'm glad you brought that up. My mother, I don't know what happened to that guy, but my mother survived in hiding on the farms with different people till three months before the liberation.

One of the Polacks turned her in. Mrs. Gurski came in to tell us they just shot your mother on the marketplace. Supposedly, she was pregnant.

You know what he received as a reward for that? A couple of bushels of coal the Germans gave. We took him to court after the war. They were threatening us, my sister and I and all the people.

The Russian court, Polish courthouse, when the Russians came in. He got five years. It was a big joke to him. Because I remember what he said to his wife, by the time you plant your wheat five times, I'll be out.

So she survived all the way, all three months before liberation. My dad wound up in Treblinka, from what I could surmise. My little sister went with the first transport to Treblinka.

Right after the war, when the war ended, I had an uncle that came back who escaped in 1939. A lot of the people escaped to Russia when the Germans came in. He was a young man in his early 20s.

He wound up in the Polish army. They organized a Polish army to fight with the Russians against the Germans. So he came in to look for relatives and he found us.

We stayed in the town for about a couple of months. Then from there, he took us. We went to L³dz.

Maybe we'll take up that story after we change the reel. Is it time to change? Five minutes. Well, we still have--

Still have five minutes.

Mhm.

As I said, my uncle came back. He was in the Polish army. He came back to the town to look for relatives. The only ones he found was my sister and I.

Naturally, it was a great celebration to find somebody that's kin to you, that cared for you.

This was not the uncle who was the Melamed?

No.

The teacher?

No, no.

This is a different uncle.

Yeah, that uncle was gone. We had a lot of uncles. Because if you remember, my mother came from 12 children.

Right, right. Just curious. Yes, it must have been a wonderful feeling.

It was a great feeling. I felt protected. I felt a kinship.

But he couldn't take care of me. I was a kid. I was in L³dz.

I remember living in an apartment. In fact, quite frankly, it's the first time I saw a flush toilet. Because where we lived, we had outdoor.

Sure. Is that where that picture is from?

Yes. That picture was taken after the war. That's me in L³dz. That must have been 1945.

I guess I needed some repair work, so they put me in an orphanage. They sent me to the Carpathian Mountains. I must have stayed there for about three months. It was really a wonderful experience. I remember going up the hills with kids and rolling down the hills and playing like a child.

Kids who were also survivors?

They were all orphans. They must have been, yes, yeah, yeah. Come to think of it, I assumed that whoever was there was a survivor. Yeah.

That's right.

We had no future in Poland. We had nobody. We wanted to go either to Israel or to America. We wanted to go someplace.

My uncle decided we should leave Poland. So we snuck across the border with the help of a Russian truck driver to Czechoslovakia, to the famed city of Prague. I remember first coming into Prague with a DP camp, a displaced persons camp.

And very impressed with the lights, even at that time, what a big town. It was the first time I ever saw a big city. We smuggled across to Czechoslovakia. We stayed there probably a day or so. From there, we smuggled across to Germany.

We got caught by the Americans. They send us back. That didn't discourage us. The next night, we tried the same thing with a guide. We made it across the border.

It was a place called Hof, Germany, Hof, or HÃ¶fen. From there, we wound up in a displaced persons camp in FÃ¼rth, which was right outside of Nuremberg. In fact, the trials were going on at that time. I used to go to the gates to see what I can see, what was going on with the Nuremberg trials at that time.

I've lost track of how old you are now. You're about--

I'm 59. No, no. Not now.

Oh, at that time?

15 about?

No, not, no, no.

'33 to '45.

'33 to '45 is 12, 13 years old. I was an old man at 10.

This is still '45.

Yeah, I was an old man at 10. '45. Yeah.

OK.

We got to Germany in 1945. We stayed in Germany for two years. From that camp, we went to another camp outside of Munich called Neu Freimann and probably stayed there for about a year.

At that time, I started school. Nobody knew what to do with me. My uncle wanted to start his own life.

My sister was somewhat older so she could work some. I wasn't old enough to really be productive. I needed some schooling. so I was knocking around from one family to another family, staying with all kinds of different people.

The UNRRA, the U-N-R-A, used to provide food for the camps. I remember my favorite meal. That's all I used to eat is peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. They were all well-prepared, and they were in the kitchen in the camp. The other food, I couldn't stand.

So my supper for probably a year was peanut butter and jelly. I still love peanut butter and jelly.

Fit right in, right?

Yeah. I don't know the sequence of things. But we discovered that we had some relations here in the United States, or they discovered through publications, and so on. We were brought over to the United States, I came here in 1947, June. I left Germany, Bremerhaven, June 7, 1947.

I came over here. We landed in New York. I wound up in an orphanage in New York. Me and my orphanages, yeah.

Again.

I remember when I first came to the United States, traditional greenhorn, you know, so totally impressed with the lights and the big city and the streetcars and everything.

Of course.

They gave me \$2. OK? There was a candy store downstairs. So help me, I'm not kidding. I went down and bought candy bars and ice cream bars for \$2. The candy bars and ice cream bars were only about a nickel at that time.

I totally gorged myself with all that. And all my money was gone. We had some cousins, far-related cousins in New York that we met up with. But there was an aunt. It was my grandfather's brother, so I guess that would be my second uncle in Chicago. My sister and I were supposed to stay with them.

We came to Chicago. We were brought here, actually, by the Jewish Children's Bureau, JCB. I was assigned a social worker at that time, Mrs. Sutker, a lovely lady. In fact, her son and my son went to high school together. They became friends.

But I stayed with my aunt and uncle for about three months or so. It didn't work out too well.

Actually, a great aunt and a great uncle.

Right.

Yeah.

They were older. They expected, I guess, my sister to be their maid. She wanted to go to school because we didn't have any schooling. She wanted some freedom.

Sure.

So she moved out, moved in with some friends that we had. She went to work. Then she would go to night school. From there, when she left, I didn't want to stay there, either. So the JCB put me in a foster home.

I stayed in that foster home with a couple by the name of Brooks, Mr. and Mrs. Brooks. I stayed there with them from '48 till 1952 when I went into the army.

They were Jewish people?

Jewish people. They had their own children, and they used to take care of foster children. It was a warm house, a lot of screaming going on. In order to avoid the screaming, I used to volunteer to do the dishes, you know. Couldn't stand the screaming.

But this woman had a heart of gold. She used to bake those big apple strudels, you know, those big cakes. I had no more problems with food. I had plenty of food.

But I'd come home at night, and I would sneak in the refrigerator and steal food out of there. She caught me and gave me all kinds of hell. I couldn't understand her. I couldn't explain why I was doing that.

She didn't understand?

She says, look. You got all the food you want to eat. All you have to do is just you don't have to steal it. But that's what I used to do.

Of course.

Any remnants like that that you recognize in your adult life now?

Oh, yeah, sure, sure. I have a tremendous fear of failure. I've lived with this all my life. I've worked exceedingly hard. I've worked very hard not to fail.

You think that's related to failing to survive.

It's related to my childhood. It's related to being alone. It's related to nobody caring. It's related to not knowing whether I will be able to exist.

My big fear as a youngster, as a teenager, was how will I ever be able to support a family. That was my big fear.

But things like stealing food or hiding food--

No, that disappeared.

You don't. That did?

In fact, it took many years. I used to have nightmares. I was a teenager already and I used to have tremendous nightmares. I used to wet my bed.

That's not unusual.

I was probably 15, 16 years old. I would sometimes wet my bed.

I couldn't control it. I used to try to blame it on something. But nobody would come and wake me up in the morning. They would be scared.

If they'd wake me up, they would wake me up with a broom to stay about three feet away from me.

You would startle?

I would jump.

And attack.

I would jump. I would not startle. I would jump out of bed. Always the same type of nightmares about being killed, about being caught.

Tortured and killed.

Being tortured, being killed. What I went through and the hunger and the pain, it's been many years. It's hard to put it in the right perspective at this particular time.

But there was a tremendous obsession at that time to make it through a day. When you think about it, and I think about it a lot, how did I do it? You know, where did I get the will? Where did I get the smarts at my age?

You know, you go through the same thing. Well, why me? It's a guilt feeling. Why me? Then, again, why not me?

Sure.

There's no answers to any of these things.

Anyway.

So once you went into the army?

I went to school in the United States. Believe it or not, I started grammar school when I was 14 years old.

Oh, I meant to ask you if you had managed to learn to read. And if so, in what language?

Well, believe it or not, I spoke German, I spoke Jewish, I spoke Polish.

And you had a lot of intelligence, obviously.

From hanging around with people, I picked up these languages. I hang around with the Russians, I picked up Russian. I used to speak Russian. Took three months to learn the language.

But formal education, I did not have.

Of course not.

Math, I knew.

Of course. That's why I'm asking about reading, reading, especially. Whether you had managed--

Yes. I read in Jewish. I read in Polish. I learned how to read in Hebrew in Germany when I was in the DP camp.

English was the toughest thing for me. The only thing I learned initially was how to swear in English. That was the easiest thing.

So you went to school in Chicago, then?

I went to grammar school. When I was 14 years old, they put me in fourth grade grammar school. Can you imagine what it's like to sit, as a 14-year-old--

It's so hard on you.

--with some eight-year-old children? The teacher is only 22 years of age, and I'm already 14. OK?

They kept me there for about, I don't know, two months. Then they put me into the sixth grade for about two months, and then to the eighth grade, and I finally finished it off in a year. So I didn't start high school till I was 16 years old.

I didn't want to admit this to my peers in high school. I had a rough time fitting in.

I'm sure. It's understandable.

I couldn't relate to the nonsense, the trivial things that were going on in their lives. I was more concerned with the more serious things. So I had a rough time. I had a very rough time fitting into the school, although I did OK. I mean, you know, I graduated high school.

I started belonging to some clubs. I started hanging around, trying to become Americanized, so with the tight peg pants and all. I went through the whole trauma, the whole trauma to become Americanized. I think I went a little too far sometimes, you know.

But then I wanted to go to college. I started Wright Junior College, or Wright College at that time. Uncle Sam was on

my back. They wanted me to go into the army. I just came from Europe, and they were going to ship me back to Europe.

But since I knew German, they offered me to go to Presidio of Monterey to a language school for a year to learn Russian so I can go back to Germany. But I would have to volunteer for four years, and I didn't want the army for four years.

So they shipped me to Korea. I was there for two years in the early '50s, right as the war, the Korean War was winding down.

In the meantime, I got married when I got out of high school. I got married. I married my wife, Jackie, and we have two sons. I'm a grandfather. I have two granddaughters whom I love with my whole life, Sarah and Alison.

Sarah was named after my little sister. My sons were named after my dad and my grandfather.

What about your sister?

My sister married a guy by the name of Jack Budkowski, B-U-D-K-O-W-S-K-I. He's in the construction business. He's ready to retire now. She has two daughters.

Did both of you marry American born?

No.

He's Polish.

He's a Polish Jew, a refugee, a greenhorn, a DP, whatever.

Survivor.

Survivor.

We are living the normal, happy American life. I have a good life now.

For most survivors, there was a gap. There was a period in their lives, a long period during which many could not or did not speak of their experiences or try not to think about them. Did you have--

Yes, yes, yes, very much so. For some odd reason, I felt it was some kind of stigma was attached to being what I was. There was almost like a guilt feeling.

Shame, guilt.

Yeah, it was a guilt feeling. I was ashamed. There was a shame why my people went to the slaughter the way they did.

In fact, I try to overcompensate, which I shouldn't admit publicly. I have guns in my house if that day ever came. I would never submit myself or my family to that I would die there if it had to be.

But I think I have tried to shield my children from that experience, maybe to a fault, maybe too much. Because I didn't want to burden them with what I went through. I want them to have a normal life. I want them to grow up with no hang ups.

Now as I'm getting older, I find that perhaps there were some mistakes made. I think they should know. They should know who they are. They should know where they came from. They should know the history. They should know the price that we paid.

Absolutely.

I'm not looking for any particular respect for that happening. I just feel that they should know. Maybe they can appreciate their lives more so.

So yes, there was a void. I was never really a child. I don't know what it's like, or never knew what it's like to play as a child, so to speak, and to participate in childish things that children, you know I was too preoccupied most of my life with trying to survive or trying to support myself or make a living and provide for my family. That was one of my greatest fears when I got married. How am I going to be able to support a family?

You've done--

I've done well.

--rather well.

Thank you very much. I've done exceedingly well.

But it's still there.

It doesn't leave.

I cannot accept success. I think tomorrow it's all going to be taken away from me. It's all going to disappear. When something good happens to me, I'm wondering why. I question it. It screws up your whole system. This is what happens.

I am not as intense as I used to be because of time. I wanted vengeance. That was one of my preoccupations. My preoccupation was to join the American air force and find myself an airplane and bomb Germany out of existence. That was for many years.

Understandable.

And Poland, to boot. Why? I mean, I always used to ask the question why. Because we're Jewish, only because we're Jewish.

I remember as a kid, you know, walking down the street. Some Polish kid, I remember it as it was yesterday, coming up to me and calling me a Christ killer. I didn't even know who Christ was. I couldn't understand that, where all this hatred came from.

I used to say to people, I remember, you know, no different. There was a saying, if you cut me, I bleed the same way as you do.

I don't know. You walk around with this. Because you're put down upon so much, you start questioning, well, why. You know, you're always taking the blame like you're at fault, the victim is at fault. It's, like, almost a rapist, the person that was raped feels that they were at fault.

That's right.

I don't know the reason for that. I probably will never get over some of the things. But I've learned to accept certain things. I've calmed down in my feelings. It's been going on 40, 50 years.

My interests now are my family. I take a lot of pride, a lot of love that goes on. It makes up. It makes up for some of it.

But what went on before? I always wanted to know what would it be like to have parents? What would it look like on a holiday to be with people? I love to be with people. I just, even now, I just love to be with people.

Always wondered, always was an outsider, you know. Especially on holiday times, when there was no relatives. But now I have children. I have grandchildren. My sister has children. We get together.

And there's a family starting.

There's a family starting. The family is starting. Roots are growing.

Again, foundations.

Yes, yes. That's why it was very important for me to carry on the names.

Of course.

Anyway.

Well. Is there something that you'd like to say in our last remaining time?

Well, I really haven't thought about that. But I don't want to get too philosophical about this. But in the larger context, I believe religion, in the name of religion, the greatest atrocities have been committed in the name of religion.

This is true.

I've always felt that. I remember right after the war, when I was still in Sokolow, I went to public school. The first thing the priest did, wanted me to convert. That's the first thing he did, wanted me to convert.

You know what he told me? He says 10, 15, 20 years from now, the Jews will go through the same thing. So why do you want to be a Jew?

Why do you?

I question it sometimes. Why do I? I was born one. I've paid a big price for being one.

Yes, you have.

It's important to me that my children continue that. Why? I'm not sure I know exactly why. It's tradition. It's certain things that it stands for.

I think you've summed up your feelings very well.

I hope so.

Thank you for telling your story.