This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Irimia Solomon conducted by Phyllis Freedman on June 3, 1996 in the museum. This is the A side of tape two.

You were saying about the documents--

So we got a kind of identification, as I said, [NON-ENGLISH]. Probably, without any translation, you will understand that is the Jewish colony of Sharhorod, bureau of the population, [NON-ENGLISH]. And this is a bulletin, and there is a number. And then is put my name, Solomon Irimia. [NON-ENGLISH] means the house, number 268.

So they knew exactly where we were living, and those houses are not very livable houses. But in any event, it was much, much warmer than outside during the winter. And it was [INAUDIBLE] colony, the boss.

And this one is Dr. [? Taich ?] Dr. [? Taich ?] was a lawyer in Suceava, Bukovina, who was deported to by the people in Bukovina, who, at that time, had the German school before the First World War because it was part of Austro-Hungaria, all the lawyers had kind of a PhD. So they were all doctors.

Now, was this a number that you had? That was your unique number right here? Not the house number, but this?

Probably.

Did you have an ID number?

Probably this was the ID number because no two numbers like this were-- everybody got, and they were listed in some books, I don't know. And then, as you can see, this means [NON-ENGLISH] in Romanian, which is seen by the commander of the military police of the city. And they had their stamp, which this doesn't have.

And when they brought us back to Dorohoi, they see [NON-ENGLISH], the Jewish community in Dorohoi, which was there, newly formed. They put that we came back. And probably, they registered us, that we came back from--

Sharhorod.

--Sharhorod.

How was the Jewish administration selected or appointed? Do you know what that process was?

No, no. I have no idea whatsoever.

What did you think of these people? Did you know them, the Jewish administration?

What about it?

Did you know these people?

No. They were-- the majority of people living in Sharhorod were from Bukovina. So we, the people from Dorohoi, were quite few. Secondly, they felt, themselves, they were more intellectual and better people than the people from Dorohoi. Why? Because they spoke two languages-- the Romanian, as everybody spoke from Dorohoi, and, on top of it, the German because they had the German education from Austro-Hungaria.

And you said that bribery was sort of the currency of the ghetto.

The ghetto towards the Romanian soldiers.

What about the Jewish administration? Could you get favors from them the same way?

I don't know. I heard that, yes. But to me, it didn't happen. Maybe they took some briberies not to send you to the work because, to work, the soldiers didn't come to pick you up.

There were a few designated people from this Jewish community-- which was imposed, the Jewish community. There was no free election to say, I prefer Mrs. Freedman instead of Mr. Solomon. They said, OK, you are the boss.

So how did you get selected for work each day?

They came again from one to each house and said, OK, we need work today. Come and work. And you went. So if they needed to build a road-- that happened to me in Murafa, some 20 kilometers from Sharhorod-- they took us there, and they had some railcars with three layers of beds, like the shelves. And we slept there overnight. They gave us, I think, once or twice-- I think twice a day-- some food, but just not to starve.

And the whole day was eight, nine, 10 hours' work, as long as the day lasted-- I mean daylight lasted.

Did they only take young men, or was everyone made to work?

They didn't select-- preferably young men, but no women, no girls. I didn't see them.

Old people were also exempt?

I do not remember very old people working there. But look, I was 18. For me, 30 years old was old, especially at that time. The 30, 40-year-old people were looking much, much older than the 30, 40 years living today.

There was a lot of typhus in Sharhorod. Tell me about this disease and the medical care that you ex--

Medical care was not. There were physicians. And those physicians, some of them were afraid not to catch the disease. So they stayed aside. Some of them said that it's their duty to help, so they got the disease. Some died. Some survived. But the percentage of survival was slim.

And I remember, after I got the disease, and I succeeded in staying alive-- I'm saying this not because it's my merit that I did something. I had probably more days than the others to live. They took us to bury those corpses. And if you visited-- and I am certain that you visited-- what you saw in the pictures, people dying sitting or sleeping or with the hand to their body or under the head or whatever, this is how they died.

And they are frozen because we are talking minus 25, minus 30 degrees Celsius, which is very, very cold. And you fill them in in those common graves. It's unbelievable. I can't explain it.

And why did they do it? First of all, it was very hard to dig because-- it took days to dig such a grave. There were hundreds of people there. They were in bulk. And we had to take them with our hands.

And another time they took me to open a road, I think. It was a very big snow. And I had some gloves, but old gloves, and I'd grown in that time. And on the tour that I was shoveling and the shovel, they broke.

So my fingers were in contact with the shovel. I didn't feel they were frozen. All my fingers were frozen. And I don't have to tell you how long did I suffer until I recovered this.

And I had a very big chance that with us was-- he was not a physician, but he had connections with the medical people. And he told me rub them because rubbing them, you might make the blood to circulate and they might recover.

And then I went home. Next to us, a physician was living. He said, look, put them in hot water as long as you can keep them, and then put them in cold water. Anyway, it's a long story, a very painful story from both suffering and morally.

So if you needed to put your hands in hot water, how did you get the water? Where did that come from?

Because I had the chance, again, having a supervisor who understood what it's all about, and he realized that he is going to keep me there, the next day he's not going to have who to work, and probably was more human than the other ones and let me go home. And this happened in the afternoon. So he didn't lose too much work in letting me go.

This was a Romanian supervisor?

Yeah, the soldiers, the Romanian soldiers.

Did you have other experiences from the Romanian soldiers that were positive?

Positive, no. I wouldn't consider this positive either. But in one sense, it was, because you could keep me there.

What about the Ukrainians? What was your contact with them?

The Ukrainians were just businesslike. You gave them something, and they gave you a piece of bread or whatever else. They are not friendly, but business is business.

How did they get-- they just walked into the ghetto each day?

They came to the ghetto, and they knew. They wanted a wristwatch, so they knew already what makes better than the other one. They said, I want a Movado or I want Seiko, not another. This would cost, let's say, $100. They gave you instead a piece of bread or else, which was worth $0.10 or $0.15.

But I lived through many, many other horror stories. For example, one time they took us to build a bridge over the Bug. The Bug was another river farther, deeper into Russia than the Dnister. And the Germans were on the eastern side, and the Romanians were in Transnistria because Transnistria was up to the Bug.

So we were supplied to do this, and they brought the Russians, or, I don't know, the Germans was built from the other side with us. In the group, when they took us to work, were a few Russian Jewish Ukrainians. And because they were dressed like Ukrainians, you could hardly tell them apart.

So he went-- probably he was hungry or else-- he went to the people around there, Ukrainians, because the bridge was built in a kind of city, village, whatever, called Trykhaty, which, in translation means "Three Houses," just a few of them. And a soldier caught him. So they brought him back. It was already going to become dark. They told him, show me, how did you get out of this? Because there were all around railcars, and we were sleeping in those railcars.

So he crawled on the knees to show how he ran. And then he shot him in front of us. So so happened-- sorry for the horror story I'm telling you-- that all the intestines-- because, I don't know, he shot him probably in the stomach-- went out. And the people wanted to take him there, and maybe he was going to heal because it was not a deadly wound.

He went after he shot them. But in the evening, he came and asked, OK, because there were people on this railcar, where did you bury him? And one of them said, look, we didn't bury him because he is still alive. Maybe you will save him. No. So they buried him alive.

This is one of them. Another one, in this ghetto in Sharhorod, there so happened to be somebody either from Dorohoi or the cities surrounding Dorohoi, also dying of hunger, starving, went out. And the mayor of the city, the Romanian mayor, saw him. Hey, Where are you going? I will go to beg a piece of bread.

Beg a piece of bread? He called the soldiers and said, OK, go and shoot him. So he went, and people are asking him, hey, Moishe, where are you going? He said, look, he's going to shoot me because I went to beg for bread or else.

And not far, there were a few trees. And those people heard the shot, and he was dead. Then they picked him up and

they buried him.

So those are just the few horror stories.

Most people died-- most people died of starvation?

A lot.

Or disease?

A lot, disease or starvation, and [INAUDIBLE] lack of conditions because you could have been 20 or 25 years old, but to have a kind of disease, and not all people were alike in build, you know? And some were strong, some not.

What did you know of what was going on in the war and what your prospects were for perhaps being liberated from the ghetto?

Look, we didn't have any possibility to know this because no radio and no newspaper. It was a complete information blackout. But the few Ukrainians there, some of them were probably so-called partisans-- the Russians in there. And because they were, we didn't know about them. They were telling the Russian front goes fine, the Russians are here, are there, closer.

And at one time, close to the end of '43, we heard that the Jews from the Moldova, they were going to be brought back again. The Americans gave money, the Russians promised this and that. But now I know that the Americans didn't give money for this, and the British, just the opposite they did, and so on.

And we hoped. We hoped that this was going to come until one day when, indeed, they told us-- the ones who were from Dorohoi-- bring this bulletin with you, which I will show them to you, and said, OK, tomorrow morning at 9:00, let's say, here in front of the building of the Jewish colony, you're going to bring your belongings-- in some cases, nothing. Bring your belongings, and you're being driven to [INAUDIBLE]-- I don't know what place where the railway station is going to be-- and you're going to board those cars, and you'll be taken back.

So indeed this was. That day we went there, and we stayed. Some of them stayed longer than the others because they didn't have as many trucks as necessary. And they did one or two transports, five transports, I don't know how many. So they took us back to a railway station. They put us, maybe not so many in one car, as we came to Transnistria.

And that took, again, two days. We arrived from Dorohoi. They let us go, like I am going to go out from here. You don't know where I'm going, what I'm going to do, where I'm going to stay.

When they told you that they were going to round you up and take you to the railway station, they told you you would be going home?

No. They were telling us they're going to bring us back to Dorohoi.

Did you believe--

The Jews, because we are not anymore in contact with the Romanian authorities. No soldiers were around us. The trucks were driven by civilians. I don't know who those civilians were, maybe also Romanian, because we didn't have any contact with them.

Well, where were the Romanian soldiers?

They were not involved in this. And then, in the train, we had some soldiers looking for us and ordered not to be open the doors, some going, I don't know, to do what kind of espionage against the Romanians. I don't know what was in there. But the supervising [? resident ?] when we went to Transnistria.

When the Jewish administration, then, told you that you would be going back to Dorohoi, you believed that?

Yes, because we heard already, and things were confirmed that the Russians were not far. And we also believed what they said. They did not want us being caught by the Russians and enrolled in the Red Army to fight against the Romanians.

And secondly, being desperate, for a lot of us, including myself, it was equally feared, going to Dorohoi, if we don't go to Dorohoi, and especially after I heard from witnesses, also from Dorohoi, who told me that they saw when my father was killed. Until that time, I still believed that he is going to survive, and after the war, we see again each other.

What did you hear about your father's death?

I heard two or three variants. One of them said that he wanted to escape, to run from the ghetto in [NON-ENGLISH] to reach us, to join us. But the other two said, look, they put him to the barbed wire fence there, and they shot him.

Which variant is the real one, I can't tell you. But for me, it's equal. If you wanted to leave or to stay or whatever, if you are shot, that's the end of the story.

In Sharhorod, you were able to stay with your mother the entire time, right?

Yes.

Was she able to stay healthy while you were in the ghetto?

Fortunately, yes. My mother, after my birth, contracted some liver problems. And as long as my grandfather, her father, lived, he helped her. They sent all kinds of [INAUDIBLE] to take care of her health. After that, she didn't have, anymore, the possibility, so she didn't go.

But she had a crisis, liver crisis, some kind of heart attacks and liver attacks or something, twice a year, very serious. But being younger, much younger, she was saved every time. During the two years in Transnistria, she never had anything, like God blessed her to survive this period.

When she came back, she had once or twice, not more. And then the last two years before she died, she had this summer one and next summer, and next summer she died, absolutely the same thing as she had all the time.

Now, she was not taken to work on a daily basis.

No.

Well, how did she occupy herself? How did the women and the children and the others who--

Look, the best-- when she had whom to speak to were speaking with another woman or another man or a child, or whatever, there was not a social life. You couldn't say, OK, we don't have what to eat. We don't have pictures to watch or television or else. Let's go together and play cards. This was not. This was out of the question.

So conversation, perhaps, with some of the other--

Having conversations, most of the time, staying home because if the soldiers who were passing on the street, they would see her, it wouldn't be the best of things. She was not able to start running. So she preferred to stay home.

But do not forget one thing. As I said, most of the time I was at work. So practically, I don't know. And when I came home, I didn't ask, what did you do today? I was happy that we could put something in our mouths to lie down to sleep.

The last couple of months were better for us because my mother had a first-degree cousin, a lady, who married a Christian. He was an officer. And when, in Romania, the anti-Semitic trend got elevated, he was told either to divorce your wife or to get out of the army. So he preferred to get out of the army. But during the war, everybody was necessary. So they took him, not to lead the troops on the front line, but to work in the administration or whatever.

So he knew that we are in Transnistria in Sharhorod because, in two years, we had the possibility, through other people, to communicate. And he looked for us, and he found us. So it happened-- I don't know how to say it-- but when they passed with the troops through Sharhorod, my mother happened to be outside, without knowing that the army is going. Otherwise, she wouldn't stay outside.

So he saw her, but he didn't say a word because it was dangerous that an officer-- he had superiors also. But later, he sent somebody of his soldiers, and they brought us, I think, weekly or twice a week-- no, I think weekly-- bread, those military bread, big ones, some butter, some honey and sugar. That's all.

So we had also what to change, to exchange. We came to you. You had, let's say, potatoes. Let's say, OK, I'm giving you a half a bread. Give me 10 potatoes, three potatoes, whatever.

So it was this exchange. We boiled water. We boiled potatoes. We had a little bit of a variation.

You said you had some letters from family members. How did the mail get through?

Letters?

Some form of communication, you said.

No, the communication was like this. There were people in Romania who had relatives, some close relatives, in Transnistria. And they were those couriers, the Romanian couriers, which connected, let's say, the Ministry of Internal Affairs with Transnistria. But for money, they communicated.

So me, in Bucharest, I'd a brother, let's say, in Transnistria. And I knew that Mr. Friedman [? Yunesky ?] is going from Bucharest there. And I told him, look, give $1,000 to my brother, and I'm giving you $500 just to take it. And then the brother writes, thank you, brother, for the $1,000. And he took this and gave it back, so these kind of relations. And sometimes--

This is side B of tape two.

You were saying that when you would like to--

This was the kind of communication.

Well, I think we cut you off when you were saying that sometimes, on the note, going back to the brother, you would say I'm here with so and so.

Yes, in order to give more names. And it was such a very special situation then. People didn't, look, OK, I'm going to tell your brother that you're here. Give me some money. No.

OK, [INAUDIBLE], I'm going to write a note, because they had to write a few words in order to prove that they received the money. So nobody was looking at this one because they got money. If they wouldn't get money, probably they wouldn't take those little pieces of paper because they were not letters. It was a very small piece of paper because they were also afraid not to get in trouble.

So you went in a transport headed back to Dorohoi. You got on trucks-- or it was a railroad.

No, no, the trucks were just to take us from Sharhorod to the first railway station in order to load us. And it's not a

boarding. It's a loading in the cars and taking us by railroad back to Dorohoi.

How many days was that journey?

Also, two, three days, I think. I remember exactly, the 27th of December, '43, we arrived in Dorohoi sometime in the afternoon.

And the trip this time was a little bit more comfortable than the time before?

No, no. It was more comfortable in the sense that instead of being, let's say, 100, we were only 50. I never counted them when we went there, so I didn't count them when we came back.

So what did you find when you got back to Dorohoi? Did you have to be processed back through? You showed your papers.

No, they asked us this. And as you see, they put the stamp--

At the railway station?

I think so. I think so. I do not remember.

Was the family home still there and you went back to your home?

No, it didn't have-- my grandfather died before we left, and the house was occupied by other people. And as Jews coming back, we couldn't have any pretension, OK, you go out from my house because I'm coming back home. And the war was more or less at the end.

So where were you housed when you came back?

Look, it so happened that my wife-- which I knew her before because an aunt of mine lived in with rent in one of their houses-- my wife had an aunt in Dorohoi which was not deported or they bribed to stay there, I don't know. So when we came back, we were housed a little, a couple of days there and a couple of days another place, until we could communicate with our relatives in BotoÈ™ani, which was very close, 30 or 40 kilometers from Dorohoi. But we couldn't communicate by going there or they coming here because it was a big movement of military because they are coming back from the front. They are running from the Russians.

And finally, we found a place. I'm pretty sure that my mother paid some rent. We got, probably, some help from her brother and sister from BotoÈ™ani.

Were there still relatives in Falticeni?

No, they were also evacuated to another place and then to BotoÈ™ani because there was the front line, and they wanted all the civilians to get out, especially the Jews, because they are afraid that the Jews are all communists, because this was the conception, that Jews equal communists.

When you got back to Dorohoi and got off the train, did you feel elated?

No, no.

Why not?

Because I knew that I don't come home. I knew that my father was killed because I found it out on our way back. And it was no excitement. OK, I had a grandmother, my mother's mother, some aunts and uncles, cousins. But everything was upside-down because there was still the war. And in Dorohoi, a lot of military were there, and they were shooting-- not

people, shooting in the air, and it was dangerous. And after that, don't forget, when the Russians came, they were not angels.

So what did you do between the time that you got home and the end of the war?

Mostly staying in the house and, very little, going from house to house to meet somebody whom I knew that either stayed in Dorohoi during my absence from Dorohoi or came back with us in the same transport. And after the Russians came, we went to BotoÈ™ani because Dorohoi-- there was nothing in connection with us.

In Botosani, my mother had a sister and a brother. Then another sister from Falticeni came with her kids. My grandmother came from Falticeni. Other relatives and acquaintances came. And we went to BotoÈ™ani in order to be helped.

And then my mother started working at the court in BotoÈ™ani because, being deported in Transnistria, she was assimilated as a war widow after that. So she had the right to sell monopolized things like stamps, which was a monopoly. It was not like-- here it's also kind of monopoly because not everybody can issue stamps, tobacco-- stamps, tobacco, and yeah-- how do you call it?-- drinks.

Alcohol?

Alcoholic drinks. But she didn't sell alcoholic drinks, just stamps and this because there at the court, they needed stamps, and lawyers and other people are smoking.

And I finished school, recognizing some years which I lost, allowing to give some exams I prepared myself. And then, when the communists took over properly in '45 after the war ended, I started the polytechnic in Romania. So after four years, I graduated.

You had some other preferred status as a survivor of the war, right, under the communists? I think you mentioned to me that you--

Preferred status?

No, you got to go to school.

Yeah, I didn't-- I have to pay taxes like anybody. But the student organizations, due to the fact that I suffered and they knew that I have no possibilities of studying and maintaining myself, I stayed in student dormitories, paying nothing. I got the tickets to eat, also paying nothing, because the help from my mother was insignificant. And I took-- I kept this money to go from Yas to BotoÈ™ani, where my mother lived.

And you went to Palestine before you emigrated to the United States-- or to Canada?

I went to Israel.

Right.

Yeah, that's a big difference. Yeah, I went to Israel because it was the only way to leave Romania. I waited from '58 to 1972 to get my passport. And it so happened that Golda Meir came to Romania, and a cousin of my wife-- so-called a cousin, anyway-- anyway, kind of a relative was working in Israel, I don't know, for the government. And so he succeeded in putting us of the list of Golda Meir, so this is how we came out of Romania.

And how did you decide then to emigrate to Canada?

We decided to emigrate to Canada because my wife had a very big breakdown. She didn't support the heat and the tension in Israel because, I think, in eight or nine months, it was the other-- the Yom Kippur War. So she decided to go

to her brother who was in Canada. So this is how things developed, roughly talking.

And you came to Canada in September of '73?

Yes.

And you worked then? Or you were already retired then?

No, no. I worked the first year in Toronto through an organization who hired engineers and placed them. And then I went to Montreal, where my brother-in-law lived. And after changing one job with another, I stayed-- it was the last job-- for eight and 1/2 years. I became the vice-president of the company. My son finished school there.

My wife tried once to pass the exam because she is a physician in order to get recognition, but she saw that it's no way easy to get it. And she was already 48 or 49. And she said, look, this is going to take four, five years. It's not worth it. And she couldn't stand this type of work, making shifts of 24 and 36 hours.

So she started working as a lab technician in absolutely the same specialty. She worked the laboratory. At 65, she retired and still works a little bit, I mean, two days a week.

And at my work, they were not orders whatsoever. So I was paid almost for one year for doing nothing, just coming to work. So I understood. I'm not complaining. I'm not blaming the owner.

Is there anything else we've neglected to discuss that you think is important to record?

The only thing which we didn't cover-- but I don't know if it's of your competence or not-- I was visiting this morning the museum, which I was very impressed by the intelligence, how it was set. But I was less impressed was this fear to mention Transnistria more than a few words and a few pictures there. For example, the pogrom in Yas, Romania is much more evidence that the whole Transnistria were tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of Jews from Romania, from Bukovina, from Ukraine, from other places died, were exterminated. When I say "exterminated," you don't need the cremators of Auschwitz to do this and mourn that.

And the Hall of Remembrance, If I remember exactly the name, where you find Mauthausen and Bergen-Belsen, and this and that-- of course, all of them of great importance to the memory of those fallen. There is no mention, at least, of Transnistria as a generic name, not like Mauthausen, Bergen-Belsen, this and that, but as a region where so many hundreds of thousands of Jews fell by the Nazi exterminators.

And this, I think, there's still time to correct it. And I don't know if my opinion, which I wrote it also in the comments, is going to be read, listened, and followed. But I think there is a place for Transnistria in this Holocaust museum because a lot of people died there, the same unguilty people like in every other place. And some of them probably suffered more, if I can say.

So I know it's stupid because suffering, to start comparing, the people in Transnistria suffered more than this one, as long as all were killed like animals. But people suffered, at least, in the same way as the other ones. So a mention of this, I think, would be worth it. And I thank you very much for taking the time to discuss with me this. I will do this in Montreal also for the Holocaust Museum and memorial in there.

Thank you very much.