

The following is an interview with Sonia Pasternak, currently of Hollywood, Florida. Mrs. Pasternak, what was your maiden name?

Zlotnik.

Could you spell that?

Z-L-O-T-N-I-K.

And where were you born?

Radom, Poland.

Where is Radom?

Radom is center Poland. It's between Warsaw and Kraków.

And what did your family do there?

My father was a rabbi, but he was also a writer. He wrote too. He was a-- he wrote the Jewish papers. And he wrote Jewish books, Jewish and Hebrew books. And his uncle, Yehuda Leib Zlotnik, was a famous educator and writer in Montreal, and in South Africa, and in Israel later on. A matter of fact, there is a street bearing his name on there, Avida.

Now, this uncle-- did he leave Poland before the Holocaust?

Before the Holocaust.

OK. Now, I would like you to tell me-- to describe the atmosphere in Radom, as you remember it, when-- under the cloud of the Nazis. What was life like? How did life change?

Before the Nazi Holocaust, we were a community of 35,000 Jews, all sorts of-- from all walks of life. And it was a life that it was not-- maybe we were not the richest people. Most Jews were poor, were workers, were rabbis, were teachers, were-- which was not the richest community. But it was a life that had a family-- had family ties, had an outlook towards Zionism and towards Israel.

As soon as the Nazis marched in, it changed completely because they started the first day that they walked in. They started immediately grabbing people for work. And some people didn't return, even on the first day. And then they established-- they tried to-- they established kind of a modus operandi in a sense that most of-- they took Jews to the hardest works, even if they didn't need it, just to maltreat them, mistreat them.

And we were-- the men were immediately in danger of being annihilated. They were-- let's say, if they were-- saw a Jew with a beard or with a Jewish head, they either pinched his-- tried to rip his beard out or the head, of course, immediately. And they joked about them, they-- between there a few soldiers if they caught them. And it was-- the life was really intolerable.

Well, how did it affect you and your family? Did you have brothers and sisters?

I had. One of my brothers-- I had two brothers who were two brothers and five sisters. One of my brothers lived in Galicia-- Volodymyr-Volynskyy. He had a wife, a pianist, and a child, a six-month-old. He was-- later on, I heard that he was killed with a grenade in a-- when he was hiding from the Germans.

My sister lived in Lemberg. And he was a symphony orchestra conductor. And they had a little girl of two years old. And he was taken to Janowska lager, where they had an entertainment, Jewish entertainment group for the Germans.

And I understand that later on, they killed them one by one as they went further to the east.

My father, since he was-- he wore a beard and he was writing, his modus vivendi was immediately cut off. He couldn't exist that way. And he was constantly in hiding. He was a sick man. If they would catch him working, I mean, they would-- he was not a worker. He had no-- he never worked in his life, in a sense. He was a writer. So he was always locked in and closed in.

And my mother was not a-- she was the provider in a sense that she used to go out and help us. And oy, I was then-- I had just finished high school. And I was the oldest of the three sisters that remained. Because-- and I tried to-- I stood in lines for-- to fetch a loaf of bread or a-- whatever we-- it was needed to live on a minimum. And then I became sick with-- I had a [NON-ENGLISH]-- what do you call this?

Maybe your appendix? Is that it?

Appendix, mm-hmm. My appendix was infected. And I had to go to a-- undergo an operation, which was done. And I was lucky that I did it because later on, let's say, if I would have to undergo later on the operation, it would have been impossible because they didn't permit such a attention for a Jew.

So after I became able to walk and to do something, my parents asked me to take the-- my sister just got married to Lemberg too. So they asked me to take her trousseau to there. It was a winter. It was a January day in 1941. And I took a horse through snows. And the Germans caught me. And they confiscated all the stuff, all the trousseau and this. But finally--

How did they catch you? What happened?

What-- well, we trekked through the snow. And probably, our--

Footprints?

--footprints probably made us an easy prey.

Target.

So they caught me. But they let me go. They said, you go. They didn't care whether we go to Russia or not because to them, they knew that we will be caught anyway-- either here or there. But what I did, I had a fur coat, my sister's fur coat. And the Jews were not permitted to wear fur coats.

So as I ripped off the cover from the fur coat, and I came on the Lemberg station, railroad station-- no, they left me in Ratka, which was quite a distance from Lw³w. And I was waiting, and I was kind of-- he didn't-- there was a Russian soldier watching. But he didn't question my papers.

So because I didn't have any Russian papers, had he caught me, I would have wind up in Siberia. But he kind of-- he figured that if I wear a fur coat, I must be from the local locality. So I probably have papers. And that's how I got to Lemberg. And of course, I just got the coat that I gave my sister. And that's all I brought.

Now, from there, I stayed there until 1942, when the Germans walked into Lemberg. My father sent for us with a truck of leather. Because Radom was a center for soft and hard leather. And they were transporting leather from Radom to Lemberg and from Lemberg to Radom.

So in front, they put up a lot of hard leather. And in the back, we were hidden by the Leather it was I and another person. And that's how we came back to Radom. And of course, we paid a handsome amount for this transport. And that's why, when I came home, I was able to do something, to provide some food for my parents and my two younger sisters.

Well, when you returned to Radom, what was life like there in 1942 for a Jewish family?

Well, everything was organized in a sense, like everybody had to work. Nobody could-- young or old, nobody could stay home. My father was still hidden because he couldn't go out. He was a sick man, and he couldn't work.

And also, they would kill him. If you were not able, physically, to work, they had no use for you. So he was hidden. We lived in a-- now, we were already in ghetto then. When I left, ghetto started organizing. And when I came back, it was fully organized, the ghetto.

Now, describe to me the ghetto and the organization in the ghetto.

There was-- there were two-- when I came back, there were two ghettos. There was the small ghetto and the big ghetto. The large ghetto, were about-- oh, I don't know how many people were already living. I don't want to say disparaging. And there was a smaller ghetto, which was between-- before, between a Polish and Jewish population, divided. But the large ghetto was always mostly Jews.

So it was-- but when I came, it was very-- it was in September 1942. It was the biggest-- the big Aussiedlung, the biggest transport of people to Auschwitz and to Treblinka. And they-- but we had-- in those days, I had a position working in a faience factory, where I used to pack. And they used to export these-- I don't even know where they went, the faience, the pots. And there, I was able to bring in my father, my mother, and my two sisters.

To work?

And we survived-- and we survived just the night of the big-- what do you call-- transport of the big Aussiedlung-- transfer, transport, or whatever.

No, wait. Did you hide in this factory? Is that what happened?

We-- actually, it was-- yeah, it was.

Yes, you hid in the factory.

I worked there officially, but they did not. Because--

How did the notice come out that everyone was going to be transported?

Oh, yeah, right. You're right. There were big notices on the walls of the ghetto and inside the ghetto, announcing that at this and this day, there will be-- how did they put it-- there will be a selection of-- wait a minute, I don't think-- I think that there was not-- I don't think even it was announced until-- oh, yeah. There were rumors that it's going to be, it's going to be. And tonight is the night. And they are going to.

And the reason we suspected-- there were some Jews worked with the SS Sturmabteilung. And they heard. And they-- to some Jews, they said something-- hide your mother or something. And then we also saw that in the morning, the big lamps were-- bulbs, potent bulbs were screwed in into the streets. So we knew something is going.

And also, we heard already from other cities what was going on. And we-- and there were also rumors that cars were driven by Germans, closed-in cars, like little closed trucks, and there, that they gassed people in these trucks. So we knew-- of course, we-- and some heard-- some had radios, and they heard foreign announcements, and foreign radio lectures, and so on.

Well, what was the consensus of opinion in the ghetto as to where this transport was taking the Jews?

By then we knew that it's going-- we heard already of Auschwitz and Treblinka.

And you heard of--

Of these two and Buchenwald, we heard.

Did you know what was going on there? Did you identify them as death camps?

Yes, we knew already. We knew already that the-- and a matter of fact, we knew that the older people were more apt to be destroyed than the younger. And we also heard-- and there was always somebody in the ghetto that had a radio that listened to it. And we knew these things.

And a matter of fact, my father, as one of the intelligentsia, used to say, we know, we will not survive. It's made-- it's too scientifically conducted. And they knew there already what was going on. We knew that in-- for instance, in Galicia, or in Lithuania, or in Latvia, that the camps were much more-- I mean, closer to the Russian borders, the camps were much more dangerous and much more deadly than on the west side.

All right. Now, you have hidden out this night in the factory. What happened after that?

In the morning, they wanted to-- we tried to survive another day. But in the morning, the trains were still standing on the railroad. So there were some groups, some-- even Jews that were afraid for their life. And they want to-- in order to protect themselves, they wanted to send out some.

But the-- Obermiller was the name of the Volksdeutsche that owned the factory. And he was more-- either he didn't know-- he probably didn't know anything about it until the next day, they sent him a letter. They heard that there were some Jews hiding here, to bring them in the ghetto.

So we were brought about-- in two days after, we were brought into the ghetto with my parents and with my dad's. And everybody was assigned a room-- every family, let's say-- a family of four or five had one room. So we were brought to the ghetto.

The small ghetto was completely eliminated. And we were brought into the big ghetto, which was slashed down to a much smaller in size. And we stayed there until other selections came. There was one, let's say, in January. It was a big selection.

Then it was-- and then the people that went to work, there was always one missing, two missing, one was this, one was that. And then some people that worked in the SS were guilty of something, of some nondescript crime. And some people that were working in some kind of stone-breaking or road-making, these were-- a lot of times were missing.

And then there were some-- mostly, they tried to eliminate the strong people. There were butchers that provided some meat that were on the black market. Now, these were rounded up and shot in some garden or behind a-- behind some kind of door or whatever there was.

And sometimes, they came right in the morning when they suspect of something there or they had somebody told them about something. They were constant. They were-- in order not to let us concentrate on anything, if we could make a [YIDDISH]-- to a position or something.

They were-- first, they eliminated the intellectuals. Then they eliminated the strong people. Then there were all kind of Actions. Now, my parents went with the Action in 1943, March 13, on Purim day. They knew that it's a holiday.

So they tried-- so they-- in order to celebrate, they needed Jewish blood. So they-- and they called it Heldentag, a day of German heroes. So we-- they took us then to Szydlowiec, a place about 30 miles from Radom.

Now, who did they take?

Intellectuals-- doctors, lawyers, rabbis. And they didn't say anything. They came to the Jewish Oberalteste that was in

charge of the Jews. And they said that they need 50 Jews with small packages and a long trip. We thought that we are going to be exchanged for English citizens because it happened once in Warsaw. There were about 15 Jews exchanged for German prisoners.

And we thought that this is it. So more people came, volunteered to be exchanged, thinking-- I mean, so-- and he, our president, whether he knew or not-- later on, he hanged himself because he thought-- he had a guilty conscience that he didn't warn the Jews that they shouldn't.

I mean, he could have only delivered 50. But there were more. They were 140 or 150 Jews that came-- children, and some-- and older people, and mostly younger-- mostly 30, 35-year-old people there.

And as we left the-- they didn't let us know anything. But as we left the ghetto, we saw right behind us Ukrainians with guns pointed at us and shovels. So we knew that we are not, of course, being exchanged.

Now, we were on the cemetery. We had some bright men, mostly lawyers, that spoke to us. They didn't let them, of course. But they said-- while we sat in the buses, they said, listen, we are all going to die there. Let's not let them have the pleasure that we died like lambs. And they said, let's all run in different directions. And who will be shot will be shot anyway. So what? But of course, the older people were not as--

Adventuresome.

Yes. So we-- I remained with my parents. I was there with two sisters, two younger sisters, and my parents. And we were standing there. And they tried to-- and they wanted to take us to the cemetery where the graves were. We were in the foreground in the beginning. And as we were standing, the SS Sturmbannführer recognized a girl that was cleaning his barracks.

And he asked her, what are you doing here? And she said, well, we thought that we are going to be exchanged. And I came here with my brother. So he says, look, you stand here. And he set her aside, meaning, evidently, to bring her back to the ghetto.

And then he took-- there were about, of us, 11 girls younger. I was there and my two sisters. And he said-- and he selected a few. And he took us over there. He said, you stay. And I'll bring you back to the ghetto. But, he said, if any of you will just say one word what happened here, you all will be shot. You just don't say where you come from, and where you-- what you saw, and so on.

And the rest of people, he took away, and he didn't let us see what and where. And we heard some shots after that. And we knew that these people were all shot. But some-- most or about 50% were running away, the younger people, the lawyers, the doctors. They were running in all directions and they were shot on the spot.

So when we came-- yeah, and they took us back to the ghetto about, oh, at night. It was 10 o'clock. And as the kapos, the Jewish kapos let us in, they knew already what was going on. And they said, you cannot say anything. Don't tell anybody. Don't. But of course, sister, or brother, or cousin of them, they knew what was on.

And then in about a few days, the clothing of my parents and of other people were brought into the ghetto. And we recognized the clothing items, who they belonged to. And they were distributed to people, then, to needy people.

And life went on, again, because it was-- this was-- every day was some kind of an Action. In 19-- before my father died, he told me that look, I don't think that they'll let us survive, any of us. Try to get a Polish passport. You look Polish. You speak well Polish. And try to get it.

Whoever can save himself, we should do it. So I provided myself with a Polish passport. It was not a good passport in a sense that they were-- and Germans and Polish police recognized immediately the-- which was authentic and which was not.

Who forged this passport for you?

I got-- I don't know. I was not in contact with the underground. I couldn't get in touch with the underground. But there was some guy that I paid him. I didn't-- matter of fact, I didn't want to know so much because it was dangerous. Let's say, if they caught me, and they said, where did you get that passport? I would have to-- I don't know how strong I would be to-- I would tr-- of course, nobody wants to be a traitor. Nobody.

But they use such methods that I don't know whether I could withstand it. So I didn't even want to know too much. I wanted to be in the underground because I wanted to run away to Warsaw, to a larger-- because in Radom, I was a little known, all right.

Not-- I don't know how many Poles knew me. But I knew some. Some knew me. And it was dangerous. So as I-- well, then I saw that I have nothing to-- I cannot stay in Radom because it was also suspicious that once you were on the list, on their list, that you are to be destroyed, they may have come for me later on.

Now, were you the only one left now?

No, I had still the two sisters. But the two sisters went and it start-- they went to work. And they were living on the premises where they worked. There were certain factories that had the Jews-- they had them sleep and eat there in order to-- now, the Germans themselves needed some hiding places, in a sense that they were needed in the hinter-ground, not on the-- not to go-- in order not to go to the front.

Radom was a big industrial city, had many industries. And they formed themselves-- they formed certain shops. They worked for the Germans, let's say, shoemakers, and tailors, and hat-makers, and all this they needed. And my sisters worked for a leather outfit that made boots and coats for the German Army. And there, they were for a while.

So I was in a sense-- and I was left alone. I-- they took-- I was working in a place where-- garden place, let's say. They had vegetables for the Germans. And I was-- anyway, I was separated from my sisters.

So I said-- so I made up with them that I'll try to run away. And I'll see what I can do for them. Now, immediately after I ran away, they took my friends, my boyfriend that I went with him, and my sisters on interrogation. They were beaten. But they really didn't know where I am. I didn't tell them in order not to.

So they were searching for you?

They were searching for me with the Jewish police. They went running immediately to the train to see. But I was hiding. A Pole hid us-- hid me and a friend. Now, how I got to contact is my girlfriend that I ran away with had-- worked in the armament. There are arm factories in Radom. One was a gun factory, and the other one was detonation-- what do you call-- the powder--

Fuse of some sort?

Detonation fly, yeah-- dynamite. So they-- so she-- he worked at the-- at this factory. And he knew a Pole that was in the underground. And he-- they provided-- they let us stay with them for a week until it quieted down. And then she took us-- the wife took us in the morning to the train and bought us two tickets. And that's how we came to Warsaw. When we came to Warsaw, on Nowiniarska 16, the woman that we had the address of told us that last night, Gestapo was there.

This was a Jewish woman?

No, she was a Pole. But she was-- evidently, she had contact-- the underground contact evidently too. And she told us, look, she said, you can stay if you want to. It is your-- it is-- I want to help you. But better stay on the steps because in case if you'll hear them coming-- and they used to-- they used to have these heavy steps because they wore the leather boots-- so you will try to whatever, either run up or-- so we stayed the whole night. We stayed on this-- we stayed on the

steps on the-- and we-- on the-- what do you call this, the steps where the--

In the front, the stoop? Or the banister?

The-- she lived on the third floor.

On the landing?

Landing or something like this, where these steps were. And we were watching. And we shaking, thinking any movement, any motion--

How old are you at this time?

At this time, I was-- since I was born 1917 and this was 1943, so I was already 20-what--

Six.

--26, something like this, yeah. She was younger than me. She was about 20. And in the morning, I got up with her. And we went to look for work. I found a job. And they put me up in a small room.

It was a-- it was-- since I spoke a good Polish, I had a high school education, a Polish high school, so I-- so they let-- they provided a room and board, kind of. And I worked for the-- for this just. And it was a nice place. It was a store, where they were selling delicacies, like juices, and fruits, and candies.

Did this passport that you got, the Polish passport, did you now pose as a Pole?

Pole. I posed as a Pole. And I lived the life of a Pole. And of course, whenever I passed by, if somebody gave me a look or something, I trembled inside and does he or doesn't he recognize me? And we were-- and whenever I walked with my friend, let's say we went sometimes to-- we went to church. Right away, you had to go very often to the church because Polish people were very religious.

And in order to protect ourselves, we had to know what was going on in the churches. And if there was a special holiday, like where the soul holiday is called in Polish, the souls, so there, we had to know what was going on in every church, and what the priest said, and all this. So I had to be-- had to know what was going on there.

And then, very soon, in 1940-- matter of fact, when we came, the Warsaw ghetto-- the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw was still in flames. So it was-- you could smell the smoke and the-- and then right very soon after that, the Polish uprising was on in 1944. And I-- everyone was chased out from the houses because Warsaw was left completely--

Decimated, flattened.

--flat-- not as much flattened, there were some houses standing. But there was no one permitted to be-- live there. And Praga was-- Praga was being bombed. But they were already the Russians, and later on, in '45. But Warsaw itself was already empty.

So there, when the-- there were big placards on the street, calling to evacuate Warsaw, to come out and stand in front of the building. And everybody would be evacuated into the trains. And they were all-- we were all taken to the train.

There, at the trains, I went into the train. I had to go in. But I knew, I was afraid that my passport would be recognized that I'm-- that it's not a real valid passport. So I jumped down at-- in Ursus, which is about-- oh, it's about, I would say, 30-- [AUDIO OUT]

And what did you do in--

In Ursus, I had to-- I worked a little bit, sometimes in the garden to help out. And I got a cabbage. And sometimes, I worked cutting flowers or peel-- or gathering potatoes from the vine. And for this, I got some potatoes.

And I worked whatever I could. Sometimes, I cleaned the house if a woman needed it. And they were wondering. They said, did you speak such a good Polish, what are you? I said, listen, my parents were taken away. And I don't know even where my family is. And I have to work. So that's how I survived.

No one knew you were Jewish at this point?

They shouldn't. By the way, when I was in Warsaw, just-- the Polish uprising took a few days. So when they-- when I was there, came in once a Polish gendarme. And he said, Mrs. So-and-- Ms. So-and-so, some neighbors-- my neighbor's son had a fight with another neighbor's son. And the neighbor, the other neighbor, said to her, listen, you are hiding a Jew.

So the gendarme came over to me, and he said, they say that you are Jewish. And I was wearing here a picture of mother-- Christ's mother. We call it Matka Boska Czestochowska. So I took it out, and I said, look, on the picture of this mother, God's mother, I swear that I'm not Jewish. And I crossed myself. So I don't know whether he believed me or he was just benevolent enough to let me go.

But I was already on the lookout. And I knew that I can't stay much longer. And I separated from my woman that I lived with. By the way, I taught her son reading and writing. And that's how she gave me living quarters during the uprising.

And of course-- and then I-- as we came to the-- we were all evacuated to the trains. From there, I jumped down, as I said, in Ursus, about 30 miles from Warsaw. And I survived there until January 13, 1945, when the Russians marched in to this place.

And there, I-- from there, I returned to Radom for a while. But I still had to be on a Polish passport because there were many instances of antisemitism of that-- the AK. The Polish AK would force doors open and kill some Jews. And they said, we want you all out of Poland. We are getting out of Poland, and we don't want any Jews here.

What happened to your two sisters?

My sisters were-- oh, yes, I came-- from Warsaw, before the uprising, I-- we heard, of course, about the losses, German losses, and German retreat to the west. So I came to-- and I heard that they are leading a lot of columns out from Poland, south and southwest. So I came-- when I came, I went to the camp, to the concentration camp, Abteilung Majdanek. In Radom was a concentration camp, Abteilung Majdanek.

And I saw them marching out. I saw the dogs. And I saw the Germans. And I saw the column moving. And my-- I didn't-- I assumed that my sisters and my boyfriend is there because I saw a lot of people were taken there.

But I couldn't run. First of all, I didn't want to join them. And I couldn't do much for them. I didn't have a good place to hide them. And furthermore, it was dangerous for me. If had I-- had they spotted me, I would have been a dead duck too.

So I saw what-- I know what-- I knew what was going on, that they were taken. Where they were taken? I assumed they were taken to Auschwitz because this was the main selection place. And I thought that the-- all the Eastern places of destroy-- the Sobibór and we read about it in Treblinka, all these were already taken by the Russians.

So I assumed that the only place they could take them is either to West Germany or to Auschwitz, which was still not liberated. So we went back. I went back to Warsaw because there were some young girls, Polish girls, that were running after me, and her, and calling, Jew, Jew, Jew, Jew.

So I was afraid. There were not too many Germans then there because they were being evacuated. But you never know, Poles could you-- could kill you just as well. Their bullets were just as valid.

So I went back to Warsaw. And I stayed there. And I worked. And we prayed. And sometimes, we went out in the street. And I saw going to work or coming back-- oh, yeah, you met sometimes Jewish girls. And we recognized. I met two girls that I recognized. I was afraid to-- to one, we went over, just-- and talked for a moment news about what she heard and what I heard and exchanged news.

But mostly, we were afraid even to go over because if someone knew me, or knew her, or even more. And we heard how many people, how many Jews were killed, recognized, or chanted, or something. I myself was several times-- was almost by--

Hair's breadth.

--hairspray that I wasn't. Once, a Polish policeman followed me. I looked terrible. I wasn't-- I didn't eat properly. And I wasn't dressed properly. And I didn't make enough money to get stuff that I. So he followed me. And I knew it's bad. But luckily, it was close to the store that I worked for. So as the five minutes around our block, I run into the store. And he came after me.

And he didn't know whether they know me or not. But then he saw that the owner talks to me. And he called me by the name. So he went out, thinking that I probably am not. Because after all, he couldn't be sure, am I or am I not?

All right, usually, the Jewish-- my legs were not too good. Polish girls' legs were much shapelier than the Jewish legs. There's one thing. We used to be famous for good faces, for pretty faces, but not good figures and good legs. So this was one strike against me. And also, my clothing were not very fashionable.

But anyway, so this one time, I got away from them. Second time was I was walking to work. And I was in my deep thoughts, not thinking what. And suddenly I come across the gendarme that was identifying everyone.

And as I saw this, I don't know, it's just luck that I turned around, and I went back. And I don't know whether he saw me or he didn't. I didn't look whether he-- and I just went back. And he didn't stop me. And that's how I survived the second time. There are small incidents, many more, but it's kind of--

Before we close, did your sisters survive?

They too-- yeah. My two sisters, one was in Ravensbrück. The other one was hurt, was injured on the Berlin-- when Berlin was shelled. The trains were shelled by Russian troops. So she was shelled. She came with a big-- they said, she was in the hospital for quite a while until she came back in 19-- end of '45.

Let me have the names of your parents.

My parents was Rabbi Shaya Zlotnik and my mother was Alta Zlotnik, née Weinreb. And my two sisters were Shoshana and Ziporah Zlotnik. And they are alive. She-- later on, we came to Stuttgart. And my sister worked for the UNRRA. She was a secretary at the UNRRA for Mr. Lerner. And I worked for the American Jewish Distribution Committee under Flores Levine.

And that's how we survived. And we-- later on, we choose to come to the United States. And we were-- we are continuous grateful to the United States government and the people, its people, for letting us enjoy the freedom and good living that is here.

Thank you very much.

I thank you very much.