

RG-50.120 #160 1 Tape
SARA UMELINSKY

- 1.16 Sara Umelinsky was born in 1924, in Wlodawa by the Bug River, in the center of Poland. She was second of three girls, who were 2 years apart. Her family was hassidic, religious, but not extremist. The extended family lived together by 'orders' of the maternal grandfather, who didn't want any of his children to live in another city. They all built houses and lived around the grandfather's business - a steam powered flour mill, and an electricity plant - which supplied electrical power to the entire city. The grandfather had many partners, and also built other small factories and workshops.
- 2.57 At the outbreak of the war, Sara had finished her elementary education, and was preparing the matriculation exams for high school, under the tension of that summer before the war.
- 3.00 No one believed there would be a war; Sara was a patriotic Polish Jew, and believed that, in case of war, Poland would win. When war indeed broke out on Sept. 1, 1939, Wlodawa was teeming with Polish soldiers. Soon, also, the refugees began arriving to the city, which had become a border city, due to the signing of the Molotov-Ribentupf accord that divided Poland. The Bug river became the frontier. Sara's house became a gathering point for fleeing relatives, acquaintances, etc. The wedding of Sara's youngest maternal aunt was scheduled for Sept. 1, and according to religious law, it couldn't be postponed. Many guests had arrived for the wedding. They were stuck because of lack of transportation. Also, bombardment on warsaw was heavy, as it was in Sara's city.
- 5.00 A couple of weeks later, when the guests had already left, and part of the city near the Bug was destroyed, there was a heavy artillery battle in the city itself, and Sara's family hid in the basement of the electrical plant. The time was fraught with fear, and the family spent it listening to the older generation's stories of WWI. When silence returned, they dared to come out. They saw the courtyard teeming with German soldiers. They had removed furniture from the offices and were using them to light fires and to heat up water to bathe.
- 5.59 Sara's mother remembered that in the office there was an Ark with a Torah scroll, used to pray on Saturdays. She dared to enter the office and saw that the scroll had been unrolled, and it was lying on the floor, and through the adjacent house. While the Germans were standing around, laughing, she re-rolled the scroll, wrapped it in a large shawl and brought it to their hiding place.
- 6.44 A week later, with the arrival of the Gestapo and the SS, all the men were rounded up - about 3000 people -, herded into the synagogue. The Germans declared that the synagogue, with its occupants, was to be burned. Money was offered to release the men, which the Germans accepted. The synagogue was not burned, and the people were released. Only 30 of the leaders of the community were sent, as 'guarantors', to the city of Chelm. There, they were beaten, robbed of their watches, etc., and sent back home. Sara's grandfather was among them.

- 9.00 Sara's grandfather was accused of conducting 'shady business' and sent to prison in Lublin for 15 months.
- 13.08 In that time, the Germans left the city, the local communists began controlling it, and a few days later, the Russians came. It was a short-lived stay. It was decided that the Bug would remain the border. The Russians offered trucks to move anyone who wanted to the other side. The communists left, and also many of the people who had been in the first round-up in the synagogue. Sara's grandfather was approached to leave also, but he didn't want to become a refugee, nor to be sent to Siberia. He stayed. The Germans came, and the sanctions against the Jews began immediately: curfew, forced labor, ban to trade with non-Jews, confiscation of goods and property.
- 16.39 The family moved in with another family in a district that became the 'Jewish' quarter [not a ghetto].
- 17.00 Forced labor meant to dry the swamps near the Bug; in the winter, tree harvesting. A
- 18.00 German, Falkenberg [who took over Sara's uncle's house] was in charge of organizing some 2000 workers, promising more food for better work.
- 18.26 Winter 1940 was the coldest in those years. Polish farmers from Sobibor arrived in town, announcing that they had seen many bodies lying in the villages of Sobibor - made for the most part - and they seem to be Jewish. Also, many of them had frozen to death. And this is what happened: [Sara's town's folk in the meantime, organized in order to bring the bodies to proper burial.] Germans brought to the forests of Sobibor a train full of Jewish 'prisoners', many of them wearing the Polish army uniform. The train had been traveling across Poland for a week. The Jews originated in the shtetl of Shtutsin, near Bialystock, and had participated in a battle between Polish and Germans. In that battle, the Poles had 'surrendered', only to follow the white flag by attacking the Germans with bayonets. The Germans punished the soldiers by loading them onto freight trains. The Poles were separated from the Jews. The Poles' trains stopped every so often, and the prisoners provided with water and food by the Red Cross. The Jewish trains didn't stop, or receive food. In arriving at the outskirts of Sobibor, they were met with sub-machine guns. Very few survived the wounds and the freezing temperatures. Those who survived, and whose extremities began to freeze, were saved by the amputation of the affected parts. The Jewish doctor in Wlodawa improvised a hospital for the wounded in a couple of small schools [batei-midrash']. The village girls volunteered as nurses. The survivors were absorbed in Jewish homes.
- 22.01 Judenrat and Jewish police force were organized at the time. In the Judenrat served the leaders of the community[?].
- 22.47 About the Jewish police: it was composed of the Jews who were working in Sanitation, in order to save themselves from harsher labor. They were all called in [they were recognized by a white armband] and declared to be the Jewish police. They could not

refuse

- 24.00 Sara worked in a tree nursery, with her mother and sisters. They were 60 women altogether. Hunger was prevalent. Sara's family had objects to trade for food. Her grandfather worked for Falkenburg; this was, he had contacts with the non-Jewish world, and was able to obtain food by trading goods.
- 25.50 There remained 2 bakeries in town. Each person was given 100 gr bread a day. The Jewish community was allowed to open a kiosk in the market 'the Jewish cooperative', where Jews could purchase some salt, shoe laces, etc. Sara's father and youngest sister worked there.
- 26.11 A month before the Russian invasion, the city filled up with German troops. Sara's grandfather learned from Falkenberg about the impending invasion.
- 27.14 On June 21, 1941, the German army crossed the Buk. Not a single shot was fired. On the same day, the Germans arrived in Brest-Litowsk, 70 km from Wlodawa. Life became more difficult as sanctions became more limiting. Any transgression to the orders were met with death by shooting [in the Jewish cemetery].
- 31.07 A request came for a few dozen Jews to build a special project. No one knew what the buildings were for. Some 30 Jews went to do the job in the vicinity of Sobibor. They were building gas chambers! The gas was tried first on the builders. Two Jews, completely naked, escaped and came to town. No one believed their story. The Germans put a price on their heads, and on the head of those would give them shelter. They were not found.
- 32.48 On Shavuot, the first 'action' was carried out. The Germans requested from the Judenrat a certain number of Jews, without saying for what. The specifications called for non-working Jews. Who were they? Handicapped, the elderly, children under 12. On Shavuot morning, soldiers dressed in black [it turned out they were Ukrainians and Lithuanians coming from Sobibor, who were collaborating with the Germans] and accompanied by the Jewish police, rounded up the Jews on the list. They were taken to the movie house. Some tried to escape. Grenades were then hurled into the building, and many were killed.
- 35.27 2000 Jews from Kalisz were brought to the town and made their homes in the crowded Jewish quarter; later also Jews from Mielec, near Krakow, joined the crowded quarters. All the refugees were welcomed and helped. Also Jews from Vilna arrived before the first 'action'.
- 38.00 The businesses of Wlodawa were turned over to the Ukrainians, who were promised independence. The city's mayor was one of those Ukrainians, a lawyer educated in Switzerland. When the Jews from Vilna arrived, it turned out that one of them had been a colleague of the mayor in school. The mayor told the Jews: when the order comes, do not go to the round-up. You are not going to the east; you are headed for extermination in Sobibor. Of course, now the news spread to the entire Jewish population who had been,

- so far, incredulous of their fate.
- 39.40 Poles began telling also that they saw trains arriving daily, with up to 40 cars. They emptied the Jews in Sobibor, and no one was to be seen again.
- 41.39 A month after the first 'action', Sara's father was sent to Blezecz, an extermination camp. He returned after a month, emaciated, broken, dirty. He didn't want to talk about what happened to him there. He was a shadow of his former self.
- 42.55 The second 'action' was in August. It was the worst of them all: they rounded up the children.
- 46.12 The rebbe from Radzin arrived in Wlodawa before the second 'action'. He was young, encouraging, and everyone came to see him out after work. After the first 'action' he declared a 3 day fast, which was construed by the Nazis as an act of rebellion. He was taken to the Jewish prison. A Jewish policeman watched over him. The rabbi suggested to the policeman to escape together to the forest. The policeman refused. Eventually, the rabbi was freed by the payment of a huge ransom, and sent to the other side of the Buk. On a day that Sara and her sister were working in a garden near the cemetery. They saw 2 SS men drag the rabbi toward the cemetery. The rabbi was shot 7 times by a revolver, and he fell. A great mourning enveloped the Jewish community. The Jewish policeman, who had refused to escape with the rabbi, was knifed in the back and became hemiplegic. He was sent away to Sobibor with his family in the second 'action'.
- 53.56 The smoke from the Sobibor ovens were seen in Wlodawa. There were no more secrets.
- 54.51 Sara and the others lived in despair in the shadows of Sobibor. Once, when working with another young woman, two officers from the internacht [?] came over to them and said 'You don't have a future.' The only slight hope was that those workers, needed by Falkenberg 0 and who had one of his work certificates, would be spared.
- 55.12 On Shabbat, October 24, another 'action' occurred. A few days before, the city filled up with Jews coming from other shtetls in the area. They slept in the streets, as there was no room any more. Sara and the entire family decided to hide in the basement, together with their neighbors. Only Sara and her youngest sister, Nehama, went to work. While there, they were ordered to appear in the round-up at the sports arena. They were told they would be checked, counted, and sent back. The arena was full. All of Falkenberg's workers were also there. At 1-2 pm Nitzke, the Gestapo commander, arrived with 2 assistants. They took out about 50 tradesmen, and left. Sara understood that she and all the rest were going to Sobibor. Then they separated men and women, afterwards mothers from children.
- 2.01.04 An uncle of Sara was chosen to stay alive, and sent to the SS lot. 8,000 people went to the train station, including Sara. On the way to the station, while walking through the market, Sara and her sister were designated by the German soldiers to load the dead and wounded Jews onto carts. When they finished, the soldiers were not there. They stood there, helpless. Still under shock, instead of hiding, they ran to catch up with the rest of

the Jews going to the trains. There, a 'selection' was taking place. Falkenberg was allowed to extract 400 of the Jews who worked for him. Sara and her sister were also chosen 'for life'.

- 11.00 The sisters went back to the city to find the entire family alive.
- 12.00 Sara's father went into a big depression, understanding there was a system to exterminate the Jews, without reason. Nothing would help. The father felt that he was to be the first to go. He told them all to worry about themselves.
- 15.00 Falkenberg established a closed work camp, with fences and guards dwellings were also there. Sara's entire family was going there together. On Nov. 6, they woke up to another 'action'. The work camp was not completely fenced yet. Those who were in, were declared to be safe. Those outside, were going to Sobibor. Only Sara and her older sister were inside the camp then, preparing housing for the rest of the family.
- 21.28 Sara and her sister went back to the city and extracted their mother and other sister from their hiding place. Their father was taken. Grandfather escaped on the way to the sports arena, but the grandmother and two aunts couldn't.
- 21.52 The 'action' to liquidate the Jews took 3 days, at the end of which the Germans declared a ghetto in the city, outside of the work camp. It was November already. Those who had escaped, returned.
- 23.08 No one knew anything about forests and partisans, so that they decided to build bunkers where possible.
- 24.42 On the 4th 'action' the entire old Judenrat and the Jewish police - with their families - were liquidated. The Nazis appointed a new Judenrat and police inside the ghetto.
- 25.06 A group began organizing to go to the forest. In March, 1943, the first group left. The first rumors of the existence of Russian partisans in the area began circulating.
- 28.00 The news arrived about the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943. The conclusion was that all the Jews, in their forced-labor camps and ghettos, are marked for extermination.
- 29.00 A Pole offers one of the sisters false documents in order to be saved. Sara is chosen to pass as an Aryan, because of her blue eyes. The Pole travels to Lublin to obtain the false documents, and Sara was supposed to learn to pray and behave as a Catholic.
- 30.40 On the last day of Passover, May 1943, the last 'action' took place. Many hid in the bunkers. After 3 days, the camp looked abandoned. About 100 Jews left it, and went to hide in the forest.
- 36.00 The next day, the survivors decided to go to Oudampol, where there was a large farm that

employed many Jews. There was no work, no room and no food. Many went back to their homes, in the middle of the night, to bring the few items left behind, to sell them for food. Many of those items were stolen before being sold. Another 'action' takes place, but Sara and her family survived it by hiding in the fields, where the harvest hadn't taken place yet.

49.00 Sara and a friend set out to find the Partisans, and they did. Sara was invited by the Partisans to join them, which she did with her mother's blessing.

52.00 The death of Sara's grandfather and uncle.

54.36 Falkenberg kept aiding the Jews, letting them escape when the news of an impending round-out arrived to him. For that reason, the Germans sent him to Buchenwald.

56.27 Life with the partisans.

3.00.00 Moving to the partisans 'family' camp in Parczen doesn't work, as there was no more room. They planned to cross the Bug, and join the partisans there, who were much better organized. They had constant communication with Moscow, radios, food, etc. The treason of the Russian partisans [perpetrated on the Jews, who wanted to stay an independent fighting force].

11.14 Partisans moved to Pinsk. The organization, the routine. Sara was one of the guards of their encampment.

15.00 The news of Sara's family end.

19.55 Anti-Semitism was rampant among the partisan elite. Living conditions of the elite.

23.35 In March, 1944, they heard the front approach.

24.00 The German attacks against the partisans.

28.10 Partisans fled until they met with the Red Army.

30.00 Sara and the other girls decided to stay put until their city was freed. The men were sent to the army, to fight the Germans. Sara received a document that identified her as a partisan, and which requested that she be helped in all areas of housing, food, etc. The women settled in a little village of Manevichi, near Kovel [over which the Germans and Russians fought much.] The bombardment was heavy.

32.00 Sara and the others worked doing laundry for the army in exchange of salt [which they traded for other food stuff with the locals]. Sara's boy friend was sent as a partisan fighter, to work as a driver in Gomel, Belaruss. They married, and Sara joined her husband in Gomel.

34.00 The journey to Gomel, and then to Minsk, where they stayed for 6 months.

- 37.54 With the news of the repatriation, Sara and her husband applied to return to Poland. Sara returned to live in her grandfather's house, but no one in the family had survived. Also, the Germans gave the order to burn the collective grave.
- 39.35 Sara and her husband decided to go to Eretz Israel. It was the end of 1945.
- 41.34 Together with their newly born daughter, they arrived in Berlin, to an UNNRA camp. They stayed there for 2 years. A son was born there.
- 42.41 In November 1948, the family arrived in Israel on the ship 'Galila', an American war ship.
- 43.41 Arrival in Haifa. They were sent to Pardes Hannah. In 1957, they moved to Givatayim.
- 45.17 In the summer of 1964, Sara was invited to testify against the Nazis she remembered, in the trial in Hanover. Falkenberg also came to testify [he had been in Buchenwald for a year]. The sentence given to Nitzchke - against whom Sara testified - was only 5 years, credited to time already served!
- 51.16 In 1973, Sara was asked to testify again in Hamburg about the 'actions'. They were found innocent.
- 52.00 Return to Poland in the 90s, and to Sobibor and Warsaw.