Born in Kaunas, Lithuania 2 March 1925. His father was an upholsterer, his mother a housewife. Had 3 brothers; one died before war. Studied in a Yiddish school, then in a Lithuanian school. Father had been very religious; spoke Yiddish at home, but knew Lithuanian, some Russian. Lived quite well. Mother was not religious.


War started when Zilber and friends were on a camping trip outside Kaunas. Kaunas soon taken by Germans. Persecution of Jews began almost immediately.

Discusses rise of Lithuanian nationalist organization which helped Germans in persecution of Jews. Talks about role of former Lithuanian ambassador to Germany. Shkirpa [[phon.]] and his organization. Front of Lithuanian activists.

On same day that war started - June 22, 1941 - posters went up in Kaunas saying Jews no longer had any civil rights. Pogroms were organized by Lithuanian throughout the country.

The night of June 24-25, 1500 Jews were killed in the suburbs of Kaunas by Lithuanians.

Discusses killing of Jews in various locales, especially in various old forts that were in the Kaunas area. By the time the Kaunas ghetto was established, 10,000 of Kaunas's 40,000 Jews had already been killed in the first days of the war.

Discusses establishment of Kaunas ghetto in Vilampol area of the city. In an area where 7,000 lived before the war, 30,000 Jews were now forced to live. Prior to the war, area had been a largely Jewish neighborhood. Organization of the ghetto was managed by Lithuanian officials. All the officials who signed the ghetto order were Lithuanians. No Germans signed it.

28 October 1941 a major 'action' took place. All Jews ordered to gather on Demokratov Square in Kaunas. Lithuanian and German troops present.
Selections were carried out, with mostly older people, women, families with many children were chosen for execution. Next day, people taken to 9th Fort, near city, and shot.

1.32 Germans and Lithuanians had carried out an earlier 'action' in August, when they killed 533 Jewish intellectuals. This was done purposely to eliminate those Jews who could have organized ghetto life. They were killed at the 4th Fort.

1.34 Discusses life in ghetto. Zilber lived with family in 3 rooms. Total of 20-22 people live in this apartment. His father, who had been struck on the head in October 1941 by a guard, died in January 1942.

1.37 Zilber's family all worked. Most Jews in ghetto put to work at the nearby air field.

1.40 Discusses Judenrat and Jews who worked for Germans.

1.43 Discusses underground anti-fascist organization in ghetto - about 600 persons. Germans in general knew about the group, but could never find out who were in it. They were all young [...]. Zilber was a member. Later group fled ghetto and joined partisans.

1.46 Underground groups started forming in ghetto in 1941. Discusses formation of groups. Collected weapons. Carried out bombings.

1.53 Mentions various books that have come out on Kaunos ghetto and the ghetto resistance, and in role of Lithuanian nationalists in persecuting Jews.

1.59 Discusses partisan activity around Kaunos.

[Break]

2.00 Ghetto underground makes contact with partisan and with Kaunos underground organizations. Mostly Lithuanian Soviet activists. Describes activists of underground organization and its destruction by Germans.

2.12 Discusses ties between ghetto underground and partisan organization.

2.18 Discusses attempt by ghetto underground to join partisans. Many killed on the way. Zilber survived.
2.20 Discusses how people sneaked out of ghetto.

2.24 Many ghetto residents established ties with partisans.

2.25 31 December 1941 underground groups in the ghetto signed a 'resolution' to form a united 'anti-fascist' organization. Established a 5-man committee. Haym Yellin was head; Zilber names other four. Zilber shows pictures of various ghetto resistance leaders. There were 600 persons in the organization.

2.29 To reach partisans, ghetto underground were often smuggled out and driven to woods by Lithuanian truck drivers. They were paid for this service, which was organized chiefly to Mevshis Musilis [phonetic], a mechanic working for the Germans. 8 such trucks were arranged. Zilber left the ghetto in this manner in December 1943.

2.35 Describes the escape of 64 prisoners, all but 3 Jews from the 9th Fort.

2.39 Zilber says underground in ghetto had training in the ghetto from older members who had been in army before war. Had arms.

2.43 Around 13 July 1944, Germans started to eliminate Kaunas ghetto. Before that, remaining inmates were taken to various concentration camps in Germany.

2.46 Interviewer asks about fate of families left behind when younger people, like Zilber, left ghetto to join partisans and how younger people felt about leaving. Zilber said they decided the greater good would be served by fighting fascism than remaining with relatives.

2.49 Interviewer asks whether joining partisans risked having the Germans take reprisal measures against relatives who remained in the ghetto. Zilber said Judenrat listed those Jews who had joined partisans as either killed or transferred to another ghetto or camp.

2.59 Interviewer asks about cultural life in ghetto, about what youth talked about.

[Break]

3.01 Zilber corrects some dates he gave earlier. Discusses life of youth in ghetto. Shows photos of leaders of underground organization.
3.04 Discusses schools that were established in ghetto. Children from 7 to 12 attended.

3.05 Schools were ordered closed in Aug. 1942. Then underground organizations organized their own schools. Gives names of various teachers. Children also used by underground. They could more easily move around Kaunos. Names many children, reading from a document. Shows photos by some of the children.

3.16 People, especially intelligentsia, wrote diaries, stories about what they were going through. Names people whose works were later published. Discusses photos that were taken in the ghetto and published after the war.

3.25 Discusses documents drawn up by his own underground organization - news reports, intelligence reports, etc.

3.32 Underground organization tried to keep people informed about news, events of war. This helped keep up morale.

3.34 Zilber describes how for a while there was an orchestra composed of ghetto policemen. There were about 160-180 policemen in the ghetto. However in March 1944, policemen were taken to 9th Fort. 34 were killed.

3.37 With the help of some Lithuanians' outside, mail was regularly carried out of Kaunos ghetto to Vilnius and other cities. Later, this was stopped by Germans.

3.38 Discusses artists and writers who worked in ghetto. Discusses his work with children in ghetto.

3.50 Discusses YIVO and other Yiddish cultural organizations and Yiddish cultural figures.

3.56 Talks about Yiddish culture when Soviets took over Vilnius - and later German invasion.

END OF TAPE

TAPE II

4.00 Zilber talks about role of people in Kovno ghetto in saving some material in YIVO collections. Zilber notes that YIVO material is now held in various archives and should be returned to YIVO, which is now headquartered in
Discusses December 19143 escape of prisoners from the 9th Fort. Shows photos of some participants in escape.

Interviewer asks about partisan experience. Zilber says he and his comrades not really prepared for partisan activity. No experience with weapons. They experienced a certain soolness and even anti-semitism on the part of non-Jewish partisans. Some partisans were more like bandits than partisans. Describes incident in which one Jewish partisan, Misha Karetskiy, was actually killed by other partisans.

Later, however, Jewish partisans in Zilber's unit outnumbered non-Jews. Haym Dovid Ratner became commissar of the unit. Frictions with non-Jews among partisans lessened. Of the approximately 360 partisans in the unit, only 7 were Lithuanians. The rest were Jews and other nationalities.

Describes partisan missions. Attacked German echelons trains. Fought also against White Poles - the Poles who resisted both Germans and Soviet authorities. Attacked Germans around Kaunas, particularly Vilampol Yezda. 225 persons in Zilber's Kovno ghetto underground were killed - either during their ghetto years or during their later time as partisans. 90 partisans were killed.

Interviewer asks where he was at time of liberation by Soviet troops. He was in forest near Kaunas with partisans. They were fighting retreating Germans. Kauna was liberated 1 August 1944.

Immediately after liberation was offered job in Central Archives of Lithuania. Began working Aug. 6, 1944. Worked there 33 years - also went to school. Became archival specialist.

Archives provided much material for Nuremberg trials and other trials. Much material on crimes committed by Germans and Lithuanians.

Discusses fate of family. Told his brother in another partisan unit had been killed. His mother and younger brother died after having been taken to Estonia.

Married a girl who had also lost all her family.