

RG-50.120 #0211 2 TAPES
MELAKHOVSKY, YELENA [nee Laykhter]

TAPE I

- 1.00 Maiden name was Laykhter. Father was born in Odessa, as was her mother. Father worked in the port. Her grandfather owned three big houses near the port. Yelena [to be referred to as Y] was born in 1934.
- 1.07 Had three uncles on father's side - all died during war. Ruvim, had studied as a young man in Munich and believed that the Germans were cultured people who would treat others well. Ruvim persuaded Y's family not to evacuate Odessa when German forces approached.
- 1.12 Y discusses family. They were quite well-off. Had a dacha by the sea. They had a large apartment in town. Y had a sister, six years older. Y said that her parents always played down their Jewish ness and their relative wealth in order not to attract attention or envy among neighbors.
- 1.18 Discusses mother's family - family name Komarov. Y says she has few memories of her childhood. Talks about friends, games. Doesn't recall any anti-Semitism before the war.
- 1.39 Family knew Yiddish and spoke it from time to time, but the basic language at home was Russian. When parents spoke Yiddish, it was always with lowered voices.
- 1.40 They had expensive furniture, paintings.
- 1.44 Talks about maternal grandmother, Rozaliya Gopner, who participated in the revolutionary movement in Odessa.
- 1.55 Asked whether Y remembers her family discussing what was happening to the Jews in Germany before the war. Remembers arguments in which family members challenged her uncle Ruvim who defended Germans. But family believed government propaganda and trusted that Stalin would keep USSR safe - an issue of danger to Soviet Jews didn't come up - or so she

- remembers.
- 2.03 Says as child didn't know much about outbreak of war. She now has the impression that the family so believed in Stalin's wisdom and strength that they were confident they and Odessa would be protected.
- 2.05 Discusses relative who had immigrated to Palestine before the war. Family was afraid to discuss him or to write to him.
- 2.10 Y is asked to describe what she remembers about 22 June 1941. Family was at their dacha. Many uncles and their families were there. It was in fact Y's birthday. Then news of war came. Y doesn't remember hearing news, but remembers how guests left dacha hurriedly.
- 2.19 Family remained at dacha because their apartment building was near the port, which was already being bombed. Father was called into army, but then released because he was over 40 and not physically eligible.
- 2.22 Y remembers bombing of coast. Family often sought refuge in catacombs which had been dug into cliffs on coast where the dacha was located.
- 2.26 Family returned to their apartment in Odessa. There were discussions in family about evacuating city. Uncle Ruvim still said Germans would not harm Jews.
- 2.31 Y doesn't remember many details - only that she always felt fear. She also remembers shortage of food. Subsisted chiefly on corn, corn flour.
- 2.33 Continued to stay in apartment until Romanian troops arrived, sometime in late fall. Y remembers many local residents greeting Romanians with the traditional Ukrainian 'bread and salt' welcome.
- 2.43 Y says after start of war, stories about German treatment of Jews began circulating in city, although she has no

contemporary personal memories of this.

- 2.45 Notices began to appear ordering Jews to gather at various places. Some of Y's father's Ukrainian co-workers discussed with him the possibility of going to the countryside where they had relatives. In fall of 1941 round-up of Jews began. Y's father hid in a basement room, but she, her mother and sister were seized by Romanians. Mother was beaten. Y remembers that a Romanian officer patted her on the head, and tried to comfort, telling her that her mother would be released.
- 2.48 On his way to a holding area, police shot Uncle Ruvim, who was sick and had trouble walking.
- 2.55 Y, her mother and sister were released by the police and allowed to return home. Family tried to stay hidden in the apartment building but were afraid of being informed on by neighbors who had either joined police or were cooperating with the occupiers.
- 3.05 Neighbor pointed out Y's apartment to Romanian officer, and the family was seized. Put in group of Jews being marched to holding area in a suburb factory with large grounds. Jews forced to sit on grounds for a number of days. Some, she later learned, were taken away and shot.
- 3.12 Discusses false documents which mother had made before they were seized.
- 3.23 Family gave some money to a Romanian guard and he allowed family to leave holding area. They decided to go to place in Vinnitsa oblast which one of father's Russian co-workers had told him about. Managed to go there, but Y doesn't remember how. Took about a month. This was in January 1942.
- 3.29 Family tried to pose as Ukrainians but they were stopped and seized not far from Chechelnyk in Vinnitsa oblast. Can't remember events clearly. Taken to police. Interrogated. Mother tried to pass family off as Ukrainians. Mother spoke perfect Ukrainian. But authorities saw that documents weren't genuine.

- Y believes the fact that father had been circumcised gave him away.
- 3.40 Family was put in a village ghetto near Chechelnyk. This was probably in spring of 1942. They moved into a small wooden house - earthen floor.
- 3.45 Some people were forced to work. Y's father got sick, perhaps pneumonia, and died.
- 3.50 Y doesn't know how many people in ghetto. She stayed fairly much to herself. Didn't play frequently with other children. Made toys out of clay.
- 3.53 There were Jews in the ghetto from all of Vinnitsa oblast - mostly rural. Family ate potato peelings, see coverings, sugar - from nearby sugar refining plant. Ukrainians frequently helped by throwing food over barbed wire fence.

TAPE II

- 4.00 Y says she has only individual memories of ghetto. Also says she can have few accurate judgments about what she had experience.
- 4.01 Discusses again in greater detail the time family left apartment in Odessa for first collection point for Jews on edge of city. Repeats comments about holding point.
- 4.13 Asked about life in Chechelnyk ghetto. Y has only intermittent memories. Remembers cold and hunger. She occasionally was able to sneak out and find items in the fields like individual beets and potatoes.
- 4.16 Learned later that many inmates of camp were Jews from Moldavia.
- 4.17 Doesn't remember feeling fear most of the time. Describes what she remembers about death of father. He died, she believes, from pneumonia.

- 4.22 Remembers feeling of constant hunger. Mother proved very strong, competent. Did everything she could to provide for and protect her children. After the war, she died of cancer.
- 4.25 Asked about neighbor who informed police about their hiding in their apartment in Odessa when they were trying to avoid being herded to the assembly place for Jews. Y said he was named Toya Kuznetsov. Saw him many times after war. Y believes that Kuznetsov, then about 13 or 14, may not have realized the seriousness of informing on the family.
- 4.30 Discusses local people who began to work for Romanians during the occupation.
- 4.36 Interviewer returns to ghetto. Tells about dolls she made from clay in the ghetto. Y discusses songs she learned in ghetto, other aspects of childrens' lives. Mother worried that Romanian guards would sexually assault Y's older sister, who was 14. Mother tried to keep older sister hidden.
- 4.46 Talks about food in ghetto. Y ate sugar beets, seed cakes [Tyrsa]
- 4.50 Asked about 'actions' again inmates. Y says that people disappeared, mainly older people. Other people she later learned, were taken to work.
- 4.52 Y says she doesn't know many people were in the ghetto.
- 4.54 Discusses presence of Germans in Chechelnik ghetto. Romanians were more numerous.
- [Break]
- 5.00 Y believes she was in ghetto about a year. At one point mother contracted Typhus, but managed to survive.
- 5.07 In 1943 or beginning of 1944 began to hear sound of Soviet aircraft.

5.10 Says Ukrainians on the outside helped the inmates, bringing them food and passing it through the barbed wire. Y herself remembers being handed some bread and a small piece of butter wrapped in a cabbage leaf.

Y discusses family's escape from ghetto. It was spring. Guard system around ghetto was a bit relaxed. They went through gap in barbed wire during the night. Y doesn't remember details. Using a fake document with the name Larushkina, they crossed a small river and went to the village of Lipetskaya. First, went to house in Chechelnik of co-worker of father, who helped them. Gave clothes and instructions about going to Lipetskaya.

5.22 Reached Lipetskaya. Lived in barn. Mother got work. Family passed itself off as Ukrainians. Mother worked in a hospital. Y took care of pigs.

5.33 Asked about liberation of area by Soviets. Y has no memory of this. She estimates family spent somewhat more than six months in Lipetskaya.

5.36 She remembers flights of Soviet planes, sounds of explosions. People went to hiding. Emerged when Soviet tanks came into village. Later, an uncle who was in army sent food and clothing to family.

5.39 Discusses train trip back to Odessa. Mother was ill, had to remain at one station, but later caught up with her daughters.

5.42 Arrived back in Odessa, but she has no specific memories of how. Y says ghetto experience may have harmed her ability to remember events.

5.43 Found their apartment occupied by an old woman. Had a long struggle to regain apartment. All their belongings had disappeared.

5.46 Family hid fact that they had been in ghetto.

5.53 Family on father's side all perished during war.

5.57 Y enters school in 1945 - the first grade - although she was already 11 years old. Food was scarce in 1945-46. Y, mother and sister helped by an uncle, mother's brother.

[Break]

6.01 Describes how after the war people hid the fact that they had been in POW camps or had been in ghettos, or had stayed in occupied areas. She says there was a wave of anti-Semitism in Odessa after the war. People said that all the Jews in Odessa had sat out the war in Tashkent.

6.05 Y attends art school. Mother worked as nurse. Specialized [Y?] in ceramics.

6.12 Describes how war experiences affected her character later in life - made her fearful, withdrawn.

6.16 Discusses anti-Semitism after the war. Believes she was not accepted into art school one year [had to wait] because she was Jewish. Did not experience anti-Semitism during her later work in an art collective.

6.23 Discusses documents she has drawn up by Romanians about the confiscation by them of the content of Y's apartment in 1941.

6.30 Y's mother died in 1956. Sister died relatively young.

END OF TAPE