

Social status and so on and so on.

Hi. I'm Dr. Jack Porter. And we're back again with another interview. This is a week, this day April 20, which is filled with many-- I am off camera, by the way. I am going to be interviewing Gerta Bagriansky But I just wanted to say a few things before we start the interview that I will be off camera.

This is a week of terrible events in Waco, Texas, and also the dedication of the US Holocaust Museum in Washington, and it's also the dedication of the museum or the stone, I should say in Boston, a commemorative at Faneuil Hall yesterday.

It's a week filled with events, including they fought back, Jewish resistance to the Nazis, which one generation after put on April 17, and will put on April 25, 1993. And many people are quite interested in the resistance. And the and what led me to bring my guest today is the fact that I wanted her husband to come on. I was on a show many years ago, Gerta, as you remember. And your husband didn't make it.

Paul Bagriansky, he was a partisan in the Kovno ghetto. But I mentioned him on the show and maybe in the future I'll get him. But today, I'd like to welcome Gerta Bagriansky to our video series that's sponsored by the Newton Holocaust and Genocide Video Project. And the videos are housed at the Newton Public Library in Newton, Mass.

Welcome, Gerta, and happy that you came. And perhaps we'll get your husband Paul and maybe even your daughter, Rosian Zerner, in a future time. Why don't we just start a little bit about your background? If you want to tell us when you were born, where, just a little bit about your family life before we get into the more heavier stuff, dealing with the Holocaust. Could you tell us a little bit about where you were born.

Well, I was born in K nigsberg. But officially, according to my passport, I'm born in Danzig. Because otherwise we couldn't have gotten out of Russia, of Lithuania. So I made a little lie, which the American government has to pardon me for.

Do you want to tell us when you were born?

08/08/08.

08/08?

08/08/08. I'm 84. I will be 85, yeah.

Wonderful.

Yeah.

84 years old.

Yes. That's almost the entire century.

Yeah, and then when the World War I broke out, we had to leave K nigsberg because my father was born in Russia. And three days, on the 8th of August which was my birthday, we had to leave and we went to Denmark where I went to school. And we came back to Danzig in 1919.

Was that part of Germany or--

A free state, a free state. Yeah, under United Nations auspices, anyhow.

And what did your father do?

My father was, in Danzig, he was a director of a factory. And besides, he was a director of the International-- this was called IVA [NON-ENGLISH].

And what did that do?

What?

What was the function of this group?

Just commercial exchange of--

Like import?

All kinds of-- I was a child. I really didn't know exactly what it was. I knew that about the factory.

Yeah. Did you come from a religious background, or a secular?

My father was not religious. But my grandfather was a famous rabbi, Chaim Ratzker.

Chaim?

Ratzker. Chaim Ratzker.

Ratzker.

He was originally from Ratsk but then he moved to Lithuania in Jonava. They came from all over to ask him questions. He was quite famous. And Jonava burned and all he wrote, all his books, were burned. But one book was saved. That book is still in Israel.

What's the name of his book?

Questions and Answers, I forgot the name, how it is in Hebrew. [HEBREW]

[HEBREW]

Yeah and answers. Yeah.

And it was rabbi?

Chaim Ratzker.

Ratzker.

Because originally he was from Ratzk. Yeah.

Yeah, which is where, Ratzk?

That was in some kind of Russian gubernia.

Yeah, OK.

And you then grew up where? Where you eventually--

Well I finished high school in Danzig. And after finishing high school, I went to study music in Paris, where I lived for the next 8 and 1/2 years.

In the roaring '20s, '30s I mean.

I went to the [NON-ENGLISH].

In what year?

Well, I went there in '26 and I came back in '34.

I must have been a wild time, the roaring '20s in Paris.

No. No. No. Not for me. I was involved with music. I had good friends and--

You studied piano?

Yeah.

You see the two pianos in my room.

Yes, it's a very cultured home. It's a home that is different.

Yeah.

Even class wise from my parents and other parents. You came from a more educated background.

I went to visit my parents, and my parents moved to Memel, at that time, Klaipeda, Lithuania. And there on a summer place I met Paul. We got married and we stayed in Lithuania.

You met Paul, your husband.

And then, of course-- we got caught up in the Germans. What?

Don't touch the mic, your mic.

Oh.

Go ahead. And--

When did you get married, by the way? In '34.

In '34.

In '34 and Rosian was born in '35.

And your daughter Rosian Zerner, who is a good friend and well known in the area, was born in 1935. So she is a child survivor.

Anyhow--

We're going to get into her story very soon.

Well, the main thing is that I even went when she was two years old, I took her to Paris, just to visit all my friends there.

And then another friend of mine who lives in Israel now, of whom you will hear because she lived with us in Kaunas and in the ghetto.

Who was that?

Her name is Rifka. And her husband is Hirsh Osherovich, the Yiddish writer.

Hirsh--

Osherovich, Hirsh Osherovich. And yes, where were we?

Well, before we get into the beginning of the Holocaust, is there anything that you want to say about your life before the Holocaust?

Well, it was a very comfortable life. I had two servants living in.

Two servants.

And this is in Kovno?

In Kovno, yeah.

Kovno, in Kaunas Lithuania.

Yeah.

And it was a very comfortable life, anyhow.

Did you feel that because of your status, your class, that you would not be touched by the Holocaust in any way, that this was just the furthest thing from your mind, even after?

We had tried-- when we saw what was what, we tried to get to Canada.

You did try?

Oh, yeah. And we had already paid-- I don't know \$3,000 at that time. It was a lot of money. We have paid for a farm in Canada.

And what year was this that you tried to get to Canada? That was in '38 or so.

'38.

Or '39. I'm not good with numbers.

Yeah, I imagine that the audience who-- historically people who hear this will have no concept, unless they hear a date sometimes about--

Yeah. No, Paul is good with dates. I'm not.

So you could have gotten out?

Yes. But the thing, what happened was we needed-- there was an inspector. And we needed a certain confirmation of his. And then we saw that the war in Poland was going to break out. And we called at the end of August. We called. He was in Denmark.

In '38 or '39?

What?

End of August of when?

Don't ask me now.

Well, the war started, what? September 1, '39.

So, yeah.

Was this in August?

It was, yeah, '39, yeah.

So it was a month before the war broke out.

Yeah, yeah.

OK.

So and we called Denmark. And all the consulates were closed. And so we were caught.

You were caught.

Yeah.

You waited too long to get out?

Yeah.

And who would have gone with you?

What?

Who would have left Europe with you?

Well, just our family.

I mean you, your husband, and your daughter?

Yeah. Yeah.

You had one daughter?

Yeah, yeah. And \$3,000, a \$1,000 per person? That I don't know. I mean that also, again, you know the number is not important.

How do you feel about that today? About what delayed it? I mean what was the--

Well, this is all absolutely not important.

No, no.

At this stage it's I don't feel anything about it because there was so much happening afterwards that--

Well, let's get into what's important to you then. Where do you want to start then? You have such an unusual and a very fascinating story. We can't cover except parts of it. But go ahead, start where you wish. What's next?

On the 22nd of June, we were on a summer place.

June of what year?

That was the 22nd of June, when war started.

Yeah.

So with Germans.

In what year? '40?

Don't ask me that.

I mean was it after Poland?

'41, I think. I think it was '41. I think it was '41.

Oh, so we're jumping to '41, OK.

Yeah.

I just want to make sure, because the audience will not know what year we're talking about. So we're at '41. Go ahead.

And this friend, Rifka, should have come. There was always a boat which came to this place where we were. And in the night, the man who rented us his house said, I dreamed the war has started. And then we waited for my friend. And we saw she didn't-- the boat didn't come. And then we understood that the war did start. And then we heard already airplanes, and so on, and so on.

Then my husband decided that he had to go to see his parents that they are all right. And I didn't want him to go. But he went anyhow. And I just kind of forced him mentally to come back. And he did come back. Because the city where he had to pass, I think it was Marijampole. I'm not sure. It was in flames. He couldn't get through. So he came back. I said, all right. I will go.

So I bought myself a scarf, like a Lithuanian peasant. And I had a net with fish in my hand. And my shoes in my hand, because Lithuania's shoes are a very precious thing. So I went barefoot. And I came to Kovno. And I went to the house of my mother-in-law, Paul's mother. And I brought her the fish. And she said to me, I said in German, this is the [GERMAN]. This is the general--

Underground?

--coming down everything, is falling apart. And then I went to stay with a friend of mine. And the next day, they called me that they have taken my mother-in-law, because they started the yellow stars. And she was going out and standing in line for bread. And somebody denounced her, and they came and took her out of the bread line.

Denounced her.

Yeah.

Said that she was a Jew?

Yeah.

So she didn't have a yellow star.

What?

She did not have--

Yeah, she had it but she forgot to put it on. So she was later on, I risked a little bit when I went to the Sauguma, which is the Lithuanian part of the Gestapo. And I explained and so on and so on. He says that just go. Go back. She will be taken care of. We shall send her out. She never was sent out. And she was--

Where was she taken?

Oh, of course, she was-- they just collected enough people, and they just shot them. And my father-in-law was in a company. And at that time, they were looking for radios. All Jews had to give their radios away. And they went to this house, to our house, and my father-in-law said, went to these people. And they said, where is he now? So we told them where he is. And they came and they took him and all the people who were there, though my father-in-law was very well-- he had relations everywhere with the Sauguma. He was one of the very wealthy men in Lithuania.

And he took-- he was taken to the Ninth Fort.

Ninth Fort? Which was a--

Yeah, that was the first place where first they kept them.

As a camp.

And they tortured them. They made them-- they put food in front of them and they had to kneel and eat the food, without spoons or anything. They had to lap it like dogs. And finally, they were shot.

So and then we went to the ghetto. First, we went into an apartment with my friend Rifka, the wife of Osherovich. He had, in the meantime, escaped to Russia. Oh, that's such a long story, because his story alone is worthwhile.

It'll be in your book that you--

What?

You say you're going to write a book anyway. But let's stay with your story. Continue with your story.

Yeah.

Go ahead.

So we went into the ghetto, and I took even, I had some big rubber plants, and all that stuff we took to the ghetto. And they gave us a room. They had already killed Jews on the street. And we passed the place where they had buried them. And you saw feet sticking out and lime on top.

Just right in the street?

What? Right in the street in front of everybody?

Yeah, yeah. When we went to the ghetto. And the apartment we got smelled of blood. And my friend Rifka was days and days, she was scrubbing all these brownish stains from everywhere.

Anyhow, another friend got us another apartment, because this was right on the street. And we had in front of the windows we had the barbed wire. So we went to this other. It was a little hut, very small. And we were four there was four cots like that. And a wood stove in the other one, and of course, you know everything was very, very primitive, very primitive.

Of course, no bathroom or things like that or running water. You had to go to a pump to get water.

And the bathrooms?

What? Oh, we had to go to a hill. As a matter of fact, Paul arranged made out of wood, a bathroom. Yeah. But in the winter to go, and go there, it was I mean, I don't know how many feet. I would say 50 feet, on a little hill up to that place. That was another story. So we came there. I still had some provisions which I have had before.

And later on, we were of course on ghetto food, which was my friend Rifka got at 4 o'clock, she got in the line to get bread, which was made I think of sawdust or potato peels, you know, was such very heavy stuff. I always toasted it. And very little. I always toasted it so that we had to chew it longer, so it lasted longer.

And you were living on what like 800 calories a day or something? Oh, I didn't count them.

I know--

I have no idea.

It's such a small amount.

I just know Rosian got very thin. I went to the doctor. She said, she needs some butter and cream.

That's what the doctor said.

So we didn't know anything about those things. We had potatoes. Somebody sent us a bag with potatoes, somebody who owed my husband. And the potatoes were frozen. And Paul's sister who was a pianist, she finished in Vienna conservatory, she was sitting with her pianist hands peeling those frozen potatoes. And have you ever have eaten frozen potatoes, then you know what one has to be very hungry, very hungry. That was incredible.

Not only that, then we didn't have-- we found out that in the streets there are some little grasses growing like little leaves, they looked like spinach also. So we collected them. We found out they are not poisonous. And I made cutlets with those.

Cutlets?

Yeah. And we still had some noodles, some stuff which I had, dry stuff. And then of course, the Germans came, for instance, just bring out all what you have. So we had still suitcases packed. So they took everything. My daughter had, Rosian had a big doll. He took the doll. And I said, couldn't you leave the doll for this little girl?

The officer said, OK take it. And there were loads of people standing around when they were emptying our things. So I said Rosian, thank the officer. He just gave you your doll. That was a little. And they took our watches. And I said, listen, I need one watch, be one of us. They took three or four. So he took one out. He said, nah, nimm. It was du, not Sie, in German this.



When you address somebody you say Sie. But to the Jews he said, du, nah, nimm.

Informal?

Yeah, not informal, mean.

Mean?

Yeah.

And--

What did he give you?

--in the ghetto things happened.

Did he give you an old watch?

My own.

Oh, he gave you one watch back.

One of ours, yeah.

He was kind.

I remember that at night, the Germans went through the ghetto and shot into the houses. Next door, there was a little boy. And they shot on his pillow. He was saved. But they just shot into the houses. Or they went through the ghetto streets and--

Just shot?

And people had to-- men had to bow before when they passed. So this man bowed. And then when the German went. And then he turned around. He says, what's your profession? I'm a rabbi. He shot him dead.

Shot him?

Yeah, just like that.

Took a gun and just shot him?

Yeah. Yeah.

These were SS or Lithuanians?

What?

These were Lithuanians?

Germans.

Germans.

Only civilians did their share before we went into the ghetto. Then they just went wild. I heard that the Lithuanian

basketball team won the European--

Cup?

Yeah.

And they were allowed to shoot a Jew.

They were allowed to?

Shoot a Jew.

They won the cup in 1942?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

And their prize was to shoot a--

Not the price. I mean I knew one, because I knew the mother of one of them who got this--

Basketball team.

--who got this privilege.

Privilege to shoot a Jew?

Yeah. Uh-huh.

Unbelievable.

In the ghetto, there comes the aktion of the 28th of October. There were 28,000 Jews in the Kovno ghetto. And at this aktion, 11,000 were taken. But we didn't know. We were told on the 27th there's an aktion. So I rushed to the-- they made such signs for chopped wood for the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht OKW. So I made a sign, Oberkommando der Wehrmacht.

And for some friends, I said tomorrow you get dressed nicely, shaved. Look nice and healthy and come with us. And my friend Rifka said, no, the Germans have said all single women have to go separately. I said you are not going separately. You are going with us. And, in fact, all single women were taken right away to the Ninth Fort.

And shot.

Yeah, with the 11,000. So we went the next day to this aktion. Next to us, other hut, was another hut. There was a young woman with two adorable little girls and an old grandmother. I think she was 90 years or so. The Germans had said whoever stays in the house will be shot. Everybody has to be at 6 o'clock in the morning at this certain place.

So this woman thought that her old mother, she wouldn't be able to go anyhow. So she left her in the house. So we went to the aktion. And there was this German, Jordan was his name.

What happened to the grandmother?

Jordan.

I was curious what happened to the grandmother and the children?

It comes, yeah. He put people to the right, to the left, to the right, and the left. Besides, there was one good German when this Jordan with his dog looked at the other side. He pushed the people to the good side. That was a good German. And Jordan was there with his dog. And one of the Jews who had brought sandwiches, they fell and the dog wanted to eat it. He said, don't eat that Jewish food. And he held him back.

Anyhow, we came back from this.

Can I just ask? How did they divide? What was the division, on what basis did they divide people, left and right.

All the old ones, those with many children. All the healthy ones, healthy looking ones, that is why I had made this big thing workers of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht.

What was that sign? You were workers.

On wood, they made it. They made it for us they made it in the ghetto. There was a big scrambling for making all kinds of signs. So I had that made. Anyhow--

To prove that you were a strong worker.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And everybody looked neat. And Rosian was the only child.

She was like seven?

Not quite. She was just six. Her birthday was on the 23rd of October. And that was on the 28th.

'35.

Yeah. Yeah.

How was she saved then?

What?

How was she saved if they--

Oh, that's a different story. I just want to tell you the story about the neighbors.

Right, but she wasn't with you?

Of course. Later on, that's a story, separate story.

Well, you were there at the selection with you and Rosie and your husband?

And the group who worked for the OKW.

So all of you as a group.

Our group.

Right?

To the good side.

The right?

Yeah, we call it the good side and the bad side.

And the bad side weak and children?

Yeah, anyhow, this woman with the two adorable children went. And when we came back, the 90-year-old woman was alive. So that is one of the stories of--

She was saved.

What? She was saved. The Germans reigned by terror. They threatened and then they didn't go through. One German came and there was an edict, all the gold and precious things have to be turned over to the Germans.

Jews had these candelabras for Shabbat and so on, and so on. So one German officer came to my house. And I knew that he also-- on the way, I had sent Paul away. And he had this whip. And he stood with his whip. He said, where did you hide all your gold and silver? We had thrown it into the sewer, you know where the toilet was, this big hole, everything what we had. Not to the Germans. So we never took it out, of course.

So the next day, almost everybody did the same. The whole ghetto stank like a sewer because everybody did take it out. But we didn't anyhow. But he says, where did you hide it? I said we didn't have any and we didn't hide it.

He says, I will be back in three hours. If your husband comes then, when your husband will be back, and if you don't tell me where you hid it, your husband will be shot at this wall here. They didn't come back. That's a German method, just--

Terrorize. Threaten and--

Terrorize, yeah. Well, in many cases they shot enough.

Yeah.

They shot enough. So that was the 28th of October.

In the ghetto was there any cultural life that existed too?

I don't remember so much in Kovno. But later on in Vilna, there was a very cultural life. There was a theater. There was an orchestra. There were lectures. There were recitals.

Yeah, there was such great music. We talked about that earlier, some of the songs [NON-ENGLISH] by Rosenthal. You know, [NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

Yeah.

(SINGING) Dee-da dee-da, dee-da-da. That's such a beautiful song by Abraham Sutzkever.

Sutzkever, yeah. Sutzkever is a very known poet. As a matter of fact, in the book by Herman Wouk, War and Remembrance, he cites, Sutzkever, a beautiful poem.

Yeah Sutzkever wrote just such a beautiful under your starry skies. And then [NON-ENGLISH SINGING] "Shtiller, Shtiller" by Kaczerginski.

If you interrupt me, I lose my--

No. Go ahead.

I lose my thread, you know because if I start it, one things goes into the other. Now comes how we got out of the ghetto.

Yeah.

There are many more details of course, in the ghetto but it will take too long. I decided really that we have to get out. So Paul was the first to go out. No. That's not true. Rosian, on the 16th of January, I still hold that date.

The 16th of January.

Yeah. We had arranged with Paul's former secretary that she would stand at a bridge and wait for her. Rosian was six years old then. And we had to go at night. There was a street where there was a big floodlight, a very wide street. And every three minutes, this floodlight came on. And we knew there was a hole in this place in the barbed wire. And we had to push her through. And she had to cross this street in the dark when there was no floodlight on. And at the other side, somebody waited for her.

And Paul says, he can't go through with it. He was standing there. He was so tense. We had had a little-- some cookies. I don't know where we got them, so that she should have something with her. And he was so nervous. He was standing and eating all the cookies. He says, no. I can't go through with it. I said, we have to. We have to.

And we had to wait. The moment the floodlight was on, and the moment it went out I pushed her through and she knew that six-year-old had to run over to the other side in the dark. And it worked, as you see.

She was taken care of by--

Yeah, so she was picked up.

On the Aryan side?

Yeah. Yeah, by the secretary, former secretary. She didn't keep her. But she went to the country. That's again, a long story.

Your husband's former secretary?

Yeah. Yeah.

In his office?

Yeah a Lithuanian woman?

Yeah, yeah.

A Lithuanian woman, she lives in Springfield now.

She lives in Springfield?

Yeah, but she is not--

Massachusetts?

Yeah, but she's not well. She's already Alzheimer's or something. She's quite senile.

So she took care of her during the war?

No, no, no, no, no. No, she just gave her her name, Rosian's name was Budrekaite. Well, I forgot the first name. But the

last name was Budrekaite.

We'll get back to your story in just one second, just to finish it up for the people who listen. Just very briefly, what happened to Rosian. She was taken into the country and hidden there or what?

Rifka had connection with two scientists, a Christian scientist woman in Lithuania.

Yeah, wonderful woman. I stayed at their place when I came out. And one of them had a sister in the country, a Russian Orthodox. And she saved, the Russian woman and the Russian people, and two or three Jewish people. That's a big story about this woman alone can fill a book.

And her name was what?

Lidija [NON-ENGLISH].

Lidija [NON-ENGLISH].

They're dead.

Yeah. They Natashok and Paviasha, the two Christian Scientists, they're all dead already.

And these Lithuanian women took care of your daughter?

Yeah. She stayed. She did in the village. As a matter of fact, she had first communion. And when she came back to me after the war, she was still kneeling before her bed and started for-- Irena, now I remember Irena was her name, Irena Budrekaite.

So she'd be from Rosian Bagriansky, she became Irena

Budrekaite.

Budrekaite. A little Christian girl.

Yeah. And she was absolutely wonderful. She was so incredible that--

Your daughter?

Yeah.

Yeah.

Once there was a Russian truck coming, there were Russians hiding there too.

Yeah.

So she saw the truck. She by herself, she ran to the next village and was hiding there.

OK.

She knew how to save herself.

By herself, yeah.

And she passed as a little Christian girl for three years?

Oh, yes. I told you that she was praying, and I have letters from her that she wrote to me. I made her a scrapbook of all those. She wrote poems, the most beautiful poems at seven, poems that are worthwhile. But they are in Lithuanian. And I can't--

Do you have those poems today?

I made her a scrapbook of all--

Do you have that scrapbook today?

Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Could you recite a little poem for us?

She has it. No, it's in Lithuanian. I forgot Lithuanian too. But they are absolutely beautiful poems.

How did she get them into the ghetto?

She wrote them in the ghetto.

Oh, she wrote them in the ghetto. I thought when she was hiding, she wrote them. Yes, but once she came visiting. We were at these two Christian Science women, and Rosian and another girl from the ghetto were they are visiting. We slept seven people in two beds. So Natashok-- six, six people, yeah, in two beds.

They visited you. And your daughter was able then to leave, and you had to stay?

Oh, no. I didn't stay. I went to work for a woman who was a mother of this basketball player. And she knew that I was Jewish. And she took good advantage for me. I chopped wood for her. I worked. She was a beautician. She had a cabinet. And in the morning, and I cooked, and I washed dishes, and I chopped wood, and in the afternoon I put on a white gown and I did have facials and things like that.

Facials?

Yeah, we massage.

Facial massage?

And one woman there, she said, your hands are so wonderful. Why don't you come with me to live with me on my estate? And I have two children. And which I did. And that's a long, long, long story.

For the sake of the audience, just so they understand, so you were on the Aryan side passing as a Christian?

Yeah.

With this woman.

Oh, yeah. My name was--

Like a servant almost.

Yeah, my official passport-- I had a false passport was that my name was Gabrielle Barauskiene.

Gabrielle.

And my story was that my husband had been deported by the Russians, and I was French. So I went as a French lady. So you passed the war as a French lady, as like a servant for this woman, or a worker. Well, that was temporary. She knew who I was.

Yeah.

Because I had studied skin pathology with her for a little while. Anyhow--

And Rosian, just to put it in perspective, so Rosian is with this--

In the farm.

On a farm, separated from you.

Yeah, oh, yes. Oh, yes.

And your husband is still in the ghetto?

No. He was the first-- he was the first after Rosian, he left.

Where did he go?

And he went-- he stayed with the secretary one or two days, and then he went to Vilna.

He went to Vilna.

Vilna. And he was caught by somebody, it was whom he knew from before. He saw him. And he worked for the Gestapo. Anyhow, this is a long story.

I know but the audience will be confused if I don't straighten it out.

That's because, well that is because--

There's two stories here.

There are too many--

Hundreds of stories here.

Too many stories.

Which one do you want to continue with? Let's take your story.

Well, we started-- with me, right?

Yeah.

That I went from this Nikolsky was her name, the beautician. I went to this estate. And they were strong anti-Semites, strong anti-Semites. She made those big parties in her ballroom. And they drank champagne. And that I know still in Lithuania, when I stood there with my glass and champagne, and with a toast to Hitler who freed us from this ugliness, the Jews. I was standing there with my glass.

And there was also a Russian captain who worked there, like a slave, because the Germans just dealt them out. And he



escaped to the woods. And there was a supervisor for all these, she had about 150 people working for her. They didn't get paid. They had a little house. They got their potatoes, their carrots, and flour, and so on. And she-- sat-- the supervisor of all these people-- she sat with me, and she loved me.

She sat with me, and says, you know, Madame Gabrielle if I would know where those Russians are hiding, I would go and I would give them, bring them food at night, and I would help them whatever I could. But if I would find a [NON-ENGLISH], a Jewish person, I would take her right away to the Gestapo. There she was sitting with me. And I was--

Oh, there was another story. Once I had to go to the next little city. I went with a horse and a little buggy myself. And on the way back, I see on the road signs of tires from a car. Only Germans had fuel at that time. So I said, oh, I will have to come in very quietly. But when I arrived, those big dogs started barking, of course, when somebody arrives.

So the daughter came down and says, so Madame Gabrielle, you have to come and help us.

There are three Germans. I forgot how they are called. They have a special assignment to go and look for hidden Jews or Russians. You have to come and help me. They are so, so disagreeable, and they're so angry. And we cannot talk with them.

So what could I do? I went there. And I started talking with them in a broken German, which was hard for me because I finished college in German, high school. And I talked with them. And after a little while, they got so loosened up. And they said, since we are in the war, this is the best moment of our war time. And thank you very much. Officially, I was there. And there was even a photograph. They made a photograph of me with those Germans who were going to look-- take me.

And they said-- and where is this beautiful garden woman? Because officially, everybody had to have a profession. So I was a gardener there, a specialist in gardening. [NON-ENGLISH] and So that was those Germans.

And I had another very difficult thing with Germans. After that, I went to another village to friends. Because there was an old woman. And she wanted to talk French. And she wanted music. She had a beautiful piano, very cultured Polish people. They had also a very big estate.

And I had spoken with her son-in-law. And finally, I had told him that I haven't told the whole truth. That I am what I am, but my husband was Jewish. And that I have a child. And the child is-- he says, I will help you. We are going to pick up the child. And I will say it's my niece. And she will live with us.

So that I had a little diary which I lost, unfortunately. I said it is too beautiful to be true. And I have some feeling that something has to come in between. And that night, there was a knock on my door. And I heard the old lady, Mrs. Romerus saying Madame Gabrielle [FRENCH].

They are picking us up. They are Poles. And the Germans grabbed whatever they could. They took the whole thing. So I got up. And that was very painful, such wonderful people. The lady didn't know anything of my story, only he did, the Romerus.

And her name again and his name again were Romerus.

Romerus.

Yeah. And I just remember they put them on one of these wooden, Chagall has this horse and buggy, such long.

These carts.

And those elegant people, they put on this thing. And Romerus himself just before he went on this thing, he took his hat off to me, and said [NON-ENGLISH], which means till we meet again, so just very elegant.

And he was taken?

And I stayed there with those German people. So the first thing, I start to put them in a good mood. I made them a very nice lunch, and vodka of course. And then I said, oh, and they said. Oh, you can be here and help us.

And I said, it's not good for me to be with only with men. And anyhow, I talked them out of that. And they gave me the buggy. And I went back to this woman where I had been before.

Her name was?

The other village.

Baniene.

Baniene.

Baniene. The daughter still lives in Lithuania.

Yeah.

I have pictures.

Do you still keep in touch with all these people?

No, I don't keep in touch with her at all. And so I went back to Baniene. But then came the story that one woman who had wanted to marry this Romerus, was for some reason or other jealous of me and she went to Gestapo, and said that I'm a Russian spy.

A woman came running from there who had been at the German department. And she came running, Madame Gabrielle, Madame Gabrielle. Listen, what they are doing to you. So they gave me a buggy and a horse, and told me to go to her aunt who lives in a little hut, I don't even know where, in the middle of nowhere.

The hut was there was a stove, and the mice were running around, know just was-- it was terrible. And there was one big turkey was 14 little turkeys. Besides, she was cooking on this stove. She was cooking potato peels for her pigs which lived a little further out outside. And for three days and three nights I was there. And since then, I have this steady conjunctivitis in my eyes. Because I was tearing all the time.

Because of the--

There was from this potato, there was smoke all the time.

Smoke in the hut.

In the hut and hot.

Filled with smoke.

Yeah.

And this affected you for the rest of your life?

Yes. And then finally I took a few suitcases, because I had saved some of their furs. And I went to the highway. And I found a German truck who took me to Kaunas.

Kovno.

Kovno, yeah. And in Kovno, I went to this-- I stayed with [NON-ENGLISH]. He had a wife and a seven-year-old child. We are still-- my husband still sends him packages every month as a matter of fact.

[NON-ENGLISH] family.

He was a very intellectual man, four languages. He translated Romain Rolland into Lithuanian, and from Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, German, and French, perfect.

Romain Rolland?

What?

He translated who? Romain--

Romain Rolland.

Romain Rolland.

And all kinds he translated. Anyhow, I stayed at their house. And one day, the bell rings. And I had a sixth sense at that time. I went to the room where the little baby was. She was seven months old then. And the wife was only there. And I hear her talking and talking and talking. And I feel that something is going on. And maybe after half an hour talk, I heard the door slam. And she came in. She was white as a sheet.

She said that was the Gestapo. And they asked about Gabrielle Barauskiene. They asked which language she speaks, if she has contact with German soldiers.

And I did, because there was one German, good German soldier, who brought packages to the ghetto for me. But it was not that. It was still the denouncement. They were still looking for me as a Russian spy. And at the end of the interview of her with the soldier, he said, well bring her in now. She says, she's not here. She went to the village for three days.

He says, well who is there? Oh, she said, that's a friend of mine who plays with my child. She risked her life because sheltering Jews, you were just hanged for that, or shot, or whatever.

So she risked her life.

Oh, yeah. She risked her life and her baby's life.

To protect you.

So anyhow, that same evening when it got dark, I went back to my Christian Science ladies Natashok, and Paviasha were their names. And from there, I falsified some papers. Although that's another story.

You're going to write all this down, aren't you, I hope. What a story.

Just--

Do you want to stop now?

No. I can just-- tell how I got-- no, this is quite a story.

Maybe we could bring a certain summation or end to the first part of this. We could always come back and hear more.

I want to just tell you how I got to the Vilna ghetto.

Yeah, why don't we end there for today?

What?

Maybe we'll end at that point for today, and pick it up at another time.

OK. I will.

Tell us just conclude it with coming to the Vilna ghetto. OK.

We went, this secretary of Paul and I, I had made papers that I can-- I forgot what it was. I just remember I was scratching all night and putting in different data. And we went to the train station. And there were hundreds of people waiting for the train.

In Kovno?

Yeah. And when the train finally came, you know it was it was just like ants. We were on top of the train and everywhere. She said, let's go. There's no way, she says. I said, you wait here. And I went along and I saw a whole wagon with German officer standing in front of them. So I went--

Now it was you and who else?

Paul's secretary.

Paul's secretary and you.

But she waited. So I went there. And I went to the officer. I said, I can't cannot compete with these people there. I can't get into the train. Would you be so kind to take me into your compartment?

You said that to--

To the officers, German officers.

German officers.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, that's the only people who had a compartment.

Because you had a special card that showed that you--

No, I didn't show anything.

So what?

I didn't never showed anything.

I said, this I can't fight I said with this riff-raff, I said. You know? I talk to the German. Anyhow, so she says, sure, my dear.

I said, but I have a friend who wants to come too.

She says, if she's as pretty as you, that's fine.

So you went in with--

I went in. And I had one German on one side and one German on the other side. And when one German went out, I started talking with the other one. And he told me, I really hate this war. And I'm a Democrat. And I have two sons at the front. And now I have to go too.

So that's number one. And then when the other, when he had to go out, the other started. And he said, he bragged. He said, we went into village and there were all these they were hiding partisans and we put 300 people to the wall and we just--

Shot them?

Shot them. That's the way I got to Vilna.

How far is it from Kovno to Vilna?

It's not so far nowadays. But at that time it took all night.

All night?

Yeah. Oh, about eight hours I would say, eight, nine hours.

It's like from Boston to Washington DC, that distance?

Well I-- I'm not good at that either.

But eight hours. So you get to Vilna. And what happens in Vilna?

In Vilna, we should have gone. You know who Gens is?

Gens, the head of the Judenrat.

Yeah, his wife was Aryan. And his wife was a sister of Paul's secretary, by the way.

His wife was an Aryan and his wife was the sister to Paul's Lithuanian secretary.

Yeah. And they had a daughter who lives in Springfield, whom Ada Gens, by the way.

What?

Ada Gens, their daughter.

Oh yeah, Ada Gens, the daughter of Mr. Gens living in Springfield?

Oh, yeah. We talk from time to time.

She's not Jewish, is she?

She's not Jewish, no.

Because this is going to come up in a week or two, the movie Vilna, Partisans of Vilna. Yeah.

Have you seen that movie?

About the story of Gens?

The one for Shoah?

No, it's called Partisans of Vilna. No?

I don't think so.

Go ahead, I'm sorry. Continue with your story of Vilna now.

Anyhow, we arrived there. And we should have gone to their house. And I remember they were not home. So we were sitting on the stairs until they came home. And then we went to [NON-ENGLISH]. That was the fur factory where all the Jews. Were and that is where Paul was supposed to wait for me.

And so I went there and I met him. And I went into the Vilna ghetto.

So Vilna ghetto comes later. OK?

And OK. We'll stop here. And later Paul was active in the resistance. You were active in the resistance too? No?

No.

You were still--

No.

At this time did you change identity? Were you now a Jew, or were you still--

I was always a Jew.

But I mean in terms of public?

But I still kept my passport because--

But in the Vilna ghetto were you now seen as a Jew or were you still passing?

No, as a Jew, of course.

You're as a Jew now.

Of course. Of course.

And Paul met you there?

He met me that was outside the ghetto. This fur factory, [NON-ENGLISH].

There seems to be a lot of movement around. It was easy for Jews, or did he have to also have Aryan papers to move around?

No. That was a work brigade.

So, he came in on a work brigade?

Oh, well, you see he was the leader of the Arbeitsamt.

Workers.

The head of the-- the one who gave workers to the Germans and so on and so on. And as a matter of fact, he risked his head. Because at a certain time, they wanted him to give 30 Jews to come to Ponary, the killing grounds.

Killing grounds.

To-- I don't know, to dig graves or something. And he refused to give the workers for that.

The Ponary was outside of Vilna.

Yeah, he was a very beloved person in the Vilna ghetto. And I walked around the ghetto, people came and they said, you are blessed to have such a husband. You're blessed because you have such a husband. He was very much for people. And he was the only honest one.

Well that's the story of the resistance, and how well, the Wittenberg affair.

Yeah, well that he knows better, of course.

Yeah, that's what I wanted so much to talk to him about.

That he knows much better.

And then later, he joined the partisans. He was with Chaim Lazar.

Yeah.

And that's why.

Well--

But your story, yes, I'll try to get his story one day. But your story is so fascinating. And all this time your daughter is being kept in the country?

She's in the country. And once she came to visit. And that was when she started her poetry. Because there were Nazis, where these Christian science women lived, there were Nazis living next door. And they came home at 5 o'clock. And they knew only that there are two women living there. So now we had these two children, Rosian and another child, because Rosian had to go back to the village. And this other child which I had brought out by the way, I had arranged for her to come out.

You adopted her?

No, no. I had made manipulations to get her out of the ghetto. And then her mother eventually found a place. And they live in New York.

But the audience probably wants to know, at least you were all you reunited at the end of the war with Rosian? You were reunited with Rosie at the end of the war, of course.

Yeah, yeah.

So she was out there. You were in the Vilna ghetto. She was there.

Yeah.

In the country.

Yeah, I'll just tell one story from Vilna.

Well of course she did, because she's still alive and-- she it's a happy ending in other words.

Yeah, one story from the Vilna ghetto I want to tell you. What was it? See? This it's boiling. When you start it, it's one just gets into the other.

It'll come to you. It'll come to you.

Yes. I had an abortion in the Vilna ghetto. Because it was impossible to have children. They were killed right away, if you saw a woman, a pregnant woman. It was done, by the way, by the best gynecologist from Warsaw, who was later killed in Latvia, kneeling, and killed with an ax.

And his name?

Yeah, I don't know. That was in Latvia. They transported them there. Anyhow, Paul came in one day and said, you know we have a wonderful opportunity. We can-- the Kovno ghetto is empty. I have such little space here in Kovno. We know people outside the ghetto. We have our daughter not far away. And we know the place and so on, so why don't we join this train?

And I just right away said, Rosian needs two chances. I am not going. So after a while, he said he's not going either. And the next day was the 4th of April, when they took 4,000 people in this train to Kovno and stopped in Ponary, and all 4,000 were killed. Just against all logic, I said, no, I'm not going.

Just by chance.

From this aktion, see I was after that operation is something-- that I forgot. I needed somebody to help me, because I had to lie down for a while. And in came this woman all in black. And her eyes frightened me.

And then I found out her history, which was she went to Ponary with one child in her arm and one child on her hand. And they were shooting and people fell. And she woke up at night with corpses on top of her. But she heard a child cry. And she made her way through all these corpses where the child was. And took that child, and walked back to the ghetto.

She didn't even think of looking for her own children. It was just she heard a child cry, and she came back. That was the woman whom I had in that house. I still see her. All right.

Thank you. Thank you. We'll stop now.

OK.

OK, thank you so much, Gerta. Thank you, really. And I know that one minute is a lifetime and there are so many more stories, so many stories. I am very proud and happy that I knew your daughter and know your daughter so long. And I know your husband. And I'm going to try to get them both to come on and also to continue your story, which I hope that you will write down.

There's just an innumerable number of stories. And I'm just glad that you shared them with us.

I think we barely touched the surface.

Oh, yeah.



And also I want to say that those who haven't been there will never know what it was like, will never know. There's a big abyss, between those who were there and those who were not.

Thank you. Now, we'll end it on that. Thank you very much.