

44, roll number 1.

Mr. Finkelstein, reel 1. Where were you born, Mr. Finkelstein?

I was born in a village outside a town in Piotrków Trybunalski, Poland.

What did your father do for a living?

My father had a flour mill.

So your father owned the mill, did he?

Yes, my father owned the flour mill, which was actually propelled by a water mill.

How many people did he employ?

Oh, I don't remember because I was only a very, very young child. And I would think half a dozen or so.

What was your education?

I went to a gymnasium, which is a high school in Poland, where I matriculated. I did not go to university because I went to my father's business. I joined him.

What were relations like between Jews and non-Jews in Poland at that time?

Well, Jewish minorities were always conscious of-- and there is antisemitism in Poland. And let me say, Jews were tolerated, but not very much liked.

Did you personally come across instances of antisemitism?

Oh, very much so, quite often, when I was going to school in the morning, which school started at 8 o'clock-- and particularly during the winters. And the Gentile children were throwing stones and snowballs and you and with insults of Jew. Although I was not one of the Orthodox Jews with special clothes which distinguish from the other children. However, they knew who was a Jew and who wasn't.

Would these be children who knew you or children who didn't know you?

Oh, I would have thought, probably, being a small town, they probably knew. Everybody knew everybody.

Did you have any friends who were non-Jewish?

In the later years, yes, I had friends who were non-Jewish and who used to come to my home. I used to go to their homes. But it was still this barrier of Jewish and non-Jewish. And they used to-- even when they came to our home, there was this strange-- a relationship, but never close friends. We were friends going out and sometimes even having a good time and so on.

In the later years, after I left school, I had friends who were-- some actually in the secret police. And we used to go out and drink together. And I had quite a number of non-Jewish friends. But I wouldn't-- well, it-- during the war, I discovered that those friends were not really friends. They turned against us when Germany occupied Poland.

And I can't, obviously, now talk about the first period because I wasn't in Poland in the first few months of the occupation, as I was in the armed forces and was fighting against the German forces on the borders of Czestochowa. And I was wounded on the fourth day of the war.

We'll say more about the war later. But in this pre-war period, you said that you would have stones thrown and insults.

Now, this was as a child, yes. This was quite common, actually, in most of the Jewish villages and towns-- or the Polish villages and towns. The Jews were treated with insults.

But did it go further than that? Was there any actual violence or assaults on Jews?

Yes. Yes, there were assaults on Jews. Well, let's say, I cannot recollect anything specific now. I personally, actually, was not involved in cases like that.

Did Jews live separately or did they live mixed in with Gentiles?

Well, I can only speak for myself. And if I talk about the town we lived in where I went to school, we were reasonably well-off. And as such, we did not live in what you generally called ghettos, but in better parts of the town. However, there were special streets and so on where Jews concentrated. And this is probably understanding because they got the synagogues and other places of worship.

And I suppose there is the psychological feeling that minorities do gather together, probably in self-defense or whatever the case may be. But it's common knowledge that minorities do tend to live together. In fact, they live together here in this country. And these are facts.

What about intermarriage, was there much intermarriage?

Oh, very little indeed. Intermarriage was considered something to be-- something outrageous, something which the Jewish community would disown the person who would marry out, although there were cases or-- such cases, but very, very few, indeed. And even the Polish people did not welcome very much Jews who intermarried.

Did Jewish people at that time consider intermarriage to be a threat to the community?

I don't think they were considering it as a threat to community because they were very, very isolated cases. So I don't think they would have considered this to be a threat to the community. It's just, I would say, a form of treachery.

What about migration? Was there much desire for Jews to get out of Poland?

Migration was a problem. But not many Jews could afford to emigrate. Most of the Jews in Poland were very poor. And to emigrate, one had to have relations abroad.

And they were many. The people I do know who emigrated were mostly people who did go to the United States of America. And I say, there were many-- there were those who worked their passages through to the United States or-- and the ones who had, really, very good contacts.

Because I don't think there was immigration allowed in any of those countries. There were no open doors, as far as I know-- either United States, or Great Britain, or other countries. So people who did emigrate were mostly, probably, smuggled or just illegally, let me say, entered countries. But there weren't many.

What was your mother tongue? What language did you speak at home?

At home with our parents, we spoke mostly Yiddish. And outside and with friends, we spoke Polish.

Were you fluent in both?

Oh, yes, very much so. I was very fluent in Polish. You see, this was considered to be not high education, but reasonably good education, when one reached the matriculation level, which is almost the same as the A-Levels. And

Yiddish was the tongue, obviously, which was handed down to me from parents.

But I spoke, in addition, Hebrew, modern Hebrew, which was part of the curriculum in our school. And I spoke very fluently Hebrew. In fact, I at those times, I read a Hebrew newspaper, which was published weekly in Poland.

And I was also active in the Zionist youth movement. And we were very much pro what was then Palestine. And we spoke very fluent Hebrew-- and not only spoke, but we could write and read-- and well, quite fluent in all those languages.

Were your parents Zionists?

What my parents were?

Were your parents Zionists?

I would think so, yes-- not active, but sympathizers.

So did you join the Zionist youth movement?

Oh, yes, I joined.

Because of your parents?

Well, I would-- I don't know. No, I don't think because of my parents. I think mostly because I mixed with children of my age who were active. And obviously, the Jews strived, then, for a homeland. And I felt that this is the right way to proceed.

What activities did you carry out in the youth movement?

Well, I was a leader of a youth movement which used to be called Hanoar Hatzioni, which means the Zionist youth. And I thought we were just reading Hebrew literature, singing Hebrew songs, and generally, well, acquiring some more knowledge about the settlements in Palestine then. I read the actual intention of eventually joining them there.

What Hebrew literature would you study?

Oh, what we studied?

Number one, we studied the Bible. And number two, we studied modern Hebrew, which is from language, grammar, and the usual literature.

And what was the attitude of the authorities to the Zionist youth movement? Were you allowed to function freely?

Officially, yes. Officially, there was freedom. The Constitution gave every citizen absolute freedom and right. But in practice, obviously, it was not always so. But generally speaking, we managed without very much hindrance to carry out our activities. However, they were not secret or anything against the state. So there was no hindrance on the part of the state or the authorities.

What was the attitude of the Zionist youth movement towards the Yiddish language?

Oh, well, it was not considered to be a language as such, which-- except that the language which one communicated. And it had some very rich literature of tremendous character. But generally speaking, we were more interested in the modern Hebrew than the Yiddish because we never learned Yiddish. Yiddish, we just acquired from our parents and we've been talking-- but-- and also reading Jewish-- Yiddish newspapers and so on. But as young people, we were more interested in the modern Hebrew.

Did you also read the Yiddish literary classics?

Oh, yes, I did-- Sholem Asch, Sholem Aleichem, Hayim Nahman Bialik. You see, most of them were published in Yiddish. And I say, there were Jewish newspapers.

So how much of a Pole did you consider yourself?

Oh, I consider myself to be 100% Pole. I considered to be probably-- when I say 100%, I mean 100%. I had my rights, my privileges, but I had my duties. And as such, I felt that I could have probably avoided-- not going to the army. But I felt it is my duty. And as such, I did.

We'll come onto the army later. But were you religious? Were you a believer?

When you say religious, I wasn't an atheist. I was-- well, I believed in God. And I was going, let me say, to synagogue occasionally. I wasn't an Orthodox Jew, which you call. I would call it a conservative Jew.

What about your parents, were they very religious?

Not very religious. They kept a kosher home. They observe Sabbath. But they were not religious-- in any case, they were not Hasidim or very strictly Orthodox.

Was your school mixed, was it Jewish and non-Jewish?

No, it was a pure Jewish school, private school. It was mixed. And it was called occasional. And it was not a religious school. It was a Jewish school, but not religious. We had the studies of the Bible and we had studies of the Hebrew language, but this was as a language, the same as we had German as a language.

Did you speak German?

Yes.

Very well?

Yes.

Which other languages could you speak besides Polish, German, Yiddish, and Hebrew?

Well, no other languages. I could understand Russian. I could converse with Russians. And I could converse with the Czech people because the languages are very similar. So I could converse. But these were the languages, actually, which I did study and I spoke, as already mentioned before.

No English?

No English at all.

Did your parents take any interest in politics?

Only if it may have been concerning them, not active politics.

What about yourself, were you a member of a political party?

No, I was not a member of a political party. I was only-- no, well, in my-- you see, obviously, when I was young, I was a member of the Zionist youth movement, but not a member of any political party.

Did any political party attract you in your youth?

Not really. I wasn't interested in politics as such. I supported the Polish government, whichever it was in office. I can't recollect. It was very much different in those days, left or right. I seem to remember that soon after the First World War, I think, when I was only a child, I think it was then Marshal Pilsudski which came to power.

Were there any political parties in Poland who were considered a threat to you or your parents?

No. No, there were no political parties which I can remember there were a threat to us. The Communist Party was outlawed. And see, I did not know members of the Communist Party. Well, there were some, let me say, amongst even the young people, some sympathizers of the communists. But see, it never attracted me. I was far on the right of the socialists.

Now, you talked about the army. Was this national service?

Yeah, national service I did in 1935 and '36. This is-- you served after you've been 21, not like it's 18 in this country.

How long did you have to serve for?

18 months.

And did everybody have to go? Was there any way of avoiding it?

Constitutionally, everybody who was physically able to go to the army should have. In practice, things working out different. There were ways of avoiding it. And the fact is that you really had to be A-1 to be accepted.

And the Poles-- or, let me say, the Polish government, didn't care very much how many Jews will not serve in the army. They weren't very keen of having them there. So they gave them, let me say, an unsuitable certificate-- didn't come up to the grade.

Why do you think they weren't keen?

Because they didn't want to have the Jews in the army, simple as that. In fact, some of my friends-- they sure did matriculate and gave the education as hired by law. They had to-- the national service, and they do go to officers cadets school. And so very few were accepted. And those who were accepted suffered hell because they were Jews.

Did they tell you that they'd suffered hell?

Oh, I know, were my personal friends.

What did they say to you about it?

Well, they simply did-- well, from my own experience, I knew. And I was not in the officers cadets. And I suffered hell as well. I fought very much against antisemitism in the army.

What form did it take?

Well, form of insults, simply that. That's all-- I mean, physical assaults. And I was not strictly disabled myself. So I could have defended myself-- but insults.

Were you physically assaulted yourself?

Not-- no. I think I was-- well, one's got to know and understand the establishment. And particularly, the Polish Army

consisted of-- most of the Poles were either very little educated or not educated at all. So when I got to the army, it was my education. I was given far more responsibility than others.

But in spite of it, there was-- you-- this antisemitism was all way visual, in every possible sphere. I manage not even to reach the colonel's office where I worked. And this is purely only because they needed people with the occasion to do this work.

But generally, Jews were treated very badly. There was no provision for them to have any kosher food or anything of this kind-- or any-- being released for a Jewish holiday. Nothing of-- there were no provisions at all.

Who did the persecution? Was it the officers, or the NCOs, or the men, or what?

Well, I would have-- mostly, it came from very low corporals and sergeants. Well, officers, you didn't meet very much. They are very, very distinct from the ordinary rank and file. So you couldn't tell. In fact, I think, personally, that I got on very well with some of the officers, my commanding officers, reasonably well, although I never reached any rank. But I got on reasonably well.

Would the men in the barracks with you join in the antisemitism?

Well, I don't know. This was something which you almost accepted every day. And one didn't take very much notice, except when one was touchy in certain aspects. But generally, you ignored it because this was an everyday occurrence.

Did you find anybody who stuck up for you?

Not really, no.

Were you the only Jew in your particular barracks?

No, I wasn't the only one, no. There were a few more. Well, like in every-- if it is army or-- some are popular and some are not. And to be popular, you got to join in and everything.

9144, roll number 2.

Mr. Finkelstein, reel 2. You were saying that to be popular, you had to join in everything.

You have to join in everything. And I always did join in everything. But I was very touchy. If everybody-- if anybody did mention Jews, particularly to distinguish them between Jew and non-Jew, I would consider myself to be a good Pole and a good citizen of my country.

And I was offended if sneers or insults were thrown at Jews as such. I heard it on a number of occasions, where we entered the homes of farmers or so during our exercises, and not knowing that I'm Jewish because I was in uniform, and my Polish was very good, and they started talking about Jews.

And when I mentioned, I'm a Jew-- oh, you couldn't be one because you speak too well Polish. This was the attitude, you see. A Jew had to speak with an accent. And one who didn't speak, in their opinion, they didn't think he was Jewish, particularly if he wore a uniform. And this already made you non-Jewish.

And I do remember very well when we, on occasion-- you entered a forest. And there were notices outside the forest-- Jews and dogs are not admitted. Was quite common.

Which particular unit were you in?

I was in the infantry. Well, the-- it was the 13th Infantry Unit.

Was that a battalion, or regiment, or what?

It was a regiment.

And whereabouts did you do your initial training?

It was in a town called Pultusk-- P-U-L-T-U-S-K.

And where were you stationed afterwards?

I was stationed all the time there during my national service.

How did you find the initial training? Did you find it hard? Was it--

Very, very hard, indeed. Very, very hard, indeed-- physically and mentally, emotionally. But I realized afterwards, it was probably necessary. The first thing an army does is to kill your ego. And that's what they did, as much as I rebelled against it. But this was the case. And not until afterwards, I realized it was necessary.

How was the initial training conducted? Were the new recruits insulted or what?

Oh, yes, dear me. And how. You were worse than an animal. It's really very, very hard training, and not so much because of the physical side of it, but the mental.

Were there any of the recruits who couldn't take it?

Oh, yes, there were some who committed suicide. Yes, there were a number who committed suicide. They could not stand up to the treatment.

How many suicides did you know of?

Well, during my time, I knew of two or three.

How did they commit suicide?

By putting the rifle into the mouth and pulling the trigger. It was not with a live bullet. But the training one we had-- it was enough to kill.

Did you know them personally?

Yes, I did.

Do you know what had happened to them to make them take such an extreme step?

Simply couldn't withstand the pressure.

Who were the chaps who committed suicide?

Ordinary people, ordinary youngsters, who just felt that they can't take it.

What kind of background had they come from?

Any background. Any background. I knew of one who was a officer cadet committed suicide. He couldn't take it.

These were non-Jews, were they?

This was a non-Jew, that's right.

Was there any inquiry after the suicides?

I don't know. I don't think it was common in those days to carry out inquiries.

Did you feel that the training that you got was adequate to fit you as a soldier? Or did you have criticisms of it as a professional training?

No, I felt it was adequate. And looking back at it, I look back and I see how useful it was. It built a lot of stamina, a lot of resistance. And I think it made me far more physically fit to withstand many activities in the later days.

At this time, in '35, '36, did you feel that Poland was being threatened?

Not at all. No. There were no threats, either east or west.

Had you felt that the rise of Hitler had been a threat? Oh, yes, very much so. Because this was the aim of Hitler too. Well, he didn't claim territorial gains apart from the parts which were so-called normally occupied by some German nationals. But we felt it was a great threat, yes.

When did you really begin to fear Hitler?

Well, we feared Hitler very much so in the last-- since about mostly '38, '39, after the occupation of Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Did you find any Polish people who said that Hitler was right?

Oh, yes. When you say Polish people, it's difficult to distinguish because there were a number of German nationals-- well, then I wouldn't describe German nationals. But they were German origin at some time or the other. And they used to call Volksdeutsches. And obviously, they were in favor of Hitler. But the Poles were-- a number of Poles, I suppose. But truthfully, I had no particular contact.

Did you know any Volksdeutsche personally?

I did, yes, very much so. We lived together. And it was quite common. I remember, even as a child, when we had the flour mill. The mechanic, the skilled man, he was a Volksdeutsche. And we even spoke German to them.

What was his name?

I think it was Weber, but I don't remember now-- or Webb.

Did any Volksdeutsche say to you-- speak to you about their support for Hitler?

Not really, no. No.

Now, what did you do once you were released from the army? Did you go back to the mill?

When I was released from the army, I went into business. We then lived in this town which was originally the large town.

Was the district town quite a big one?

This was Piotrków Trybunalski, about 55,000 population. And my father had a timber yard. And I joined him in the



business, the timber yard. And we also had a sawmill in another part of Poland. And I used to occasionally go there.

Did you ever travel outside Poland before the war?

No, I did not travel outside before the war. It was not quite common to do so unless you had relatives in France or in neighboring countries. It was not quite-- in fact, it was very expensive. Even so-called middle class people could not afford it.

Now, can we go on to the war and its outbreak? Did the outbreak of war take you by surprise?

Not really. Not really. I wished it would never come, but it did.

What were you doing on the day that war broke out?

I was already in the-- mobilized in the army. Two weeks before the outbreak of the war, I was mobilized and sent to the front. So the day the war broke out or the morning of the 1st of September, 1939, I was in the army then and engaged in battle a day later.

What did mobilization involve for you personally?

Mobilization to join a unit and sent to wherever was necessary. In my case, we were sent to the front, which is-- was not far from Czestochowa.

What was your unit?

25th Infantry Battalion-- no, Regiment.

And what rank did you hold?

I held private.

When you arrived at the front near Czestochowa, what did it look like? What was the sight that met your eyes?

Well, when we arrived two weeks before, we were just digging trenches and keeping watch.

Did people seem confident, or nervous and apprehensive, or what?

We still hope it will never happen. We thought Hitler is bluffing.

Was what was the attitude of people towards the enemy-- people in the Polish Army? Did they hate the enemy or not?

Obviously, everybody hates the enemy, particularly the one who's out to destroy you. But personally, knowing the Polish people, I knew they would have rather fought against the Russians than against the Germans. They hated the Russians far more.

Why was that?

Well, I suppose it got something to do with the history, being continuously overrun and occupied again. And I didn't hear. But in-- even in history books and in literature, you always find a hate from war against the Russians than against the Germans.

Did the army feel confident about fighting the Germans or not?

Do you mean, did the officers feel confident? Because I don't think the-- I don't think anybody felt confident. We had no

support of any kind. In fact, we-- some of us even didn't have rifles and very little machine gun-- was a rare occasion. And artillery was not with us. Aircraft-- well, I haven't seen any at all. The only ones I saw were German aircraft bombing us.

Did you have a rifle?

I had a rifle, yes.

But were there any of your comrades who didn't have rifles?

There were some who had no rifles, yes. There were not enough to go round. But even so, I mean, if you had a rifle, it was absolutely useless. How can you fight against tanks, and machine guns, and artillery, and aircraft with a rifle?

Did the soldiers grumble about the lack of equipment?

There was no time to grumble about anything. Once we were overrun, we were on the run all the time until I was wounded on the fourth day of the war, on the 4th of September.

Now, you said that the fighting started the day after the outbreak of war, the fighting started for you.

That's right.

Can you tell me in detail what happened on that day?

Well, when you say fighting, there was no hand-to-hand fighting. We were simply retreating. And now and again, we put a little stand up by firing a few bullets into the enemy, which made no effect at all. And then just simply-- well, covered withdrawal. I call it running away until we caught up. And on the fourth day, we were overrun. And I was wounded.

What were the Germans attacking you with-- you personally?

They were attacking-- well, in fact, I and a few of my comrades and other civilians were hiding in ditches which were covered with straw. It was very early in the morning when the Germans overran this part. And they were shooting incendiary bombs and bullets. And the straw caught fire above us.

So we got out of the bunkers, and dropped our rifle, and put our hand up. But the machine gun was standing about a few yards from us. And they indiscriminately shooting and killing everybody. I was wounded in the leg and burned in my hands and head, but pretending that I was dead. I managed to stay the whole day in the field buried on the straw because it was harvest time.

And the whole night, until the next morning, when I must have passed out or fallen asleep. But when I woke up and I saw what state I am-- all the hands were jellied and whatever I touched-- here in the middle of the field, I said, obviously, I got no chance to survive.

And an idea just came to my head. And I saw the German Army's moving. So I called. And several German soldiers with their rifles came over. And suddenly, I had an idea, and I started speaking in German. And I said that I'm a Volksdeutsche in the Polish Army. And somehow, they believed me.

And they sent a truck, which removed me from the battlefield, to a chemist. And they laid me down on a bench. And later on, at some other time-- I don't remember, obviously, how long it was. But I only remember, I was put in an ambulance and carried for a very, very long time until I arrived in a hospital.

And I do remember very well that I was taken onto the operating table. And the doctor asked me in German, [GERMAN]-- what is your name? And I said, Finkelstein. So he turned to me. And he said, [GERMAN]-- are you the

brother of Litvinov? And I assumed that-- afterwards that Litvinov's name must have been Finkelstein because he was a Jew. He was a Russian--

Diplomat.

--foreign minister, I think he was. And obviously, I did not reply to it. And I was operated. And then I spent quite-- well, actually, the first six weeks I spent in isolation ward because I had an infection. And afterwards, I was taken to a ward where there were four other Polish Jewish prisoners of war. They put us all together in one ward. And I spent 11 months there.

If you-- you said that you were a Volksdeutsche when you were captured.

That's right.

If you-- if they hadn't thought you were a Volksdeutsche, what do you think would have happened?

Well, in fact, my words-- first words to them-- look, you see how I look. And I got no chance to survive. So it's better if you will finish me off. But when I said, [GERMAN], and they somehow felt that they cannot kill me.

When they were machine gunning the Polish troops, were they machine gunning people who were attempting to surrender?

Yes. Not only-- there were women and children there as well. And they took no notice of anyone. With our hands up and so on, they simply machine gunned everybody.

How did the women and children come to be there?

Because it was in the fields. Everybody tried to get away and hide somewhere. And they thought they were hiding-- there is-- this was like a bunker or ditch and covered up with straw to mask it, you see, before. But once they started a fire, well, the only chance was to get out.

Did they machine gun those who were attempting to get away from the fire?

They machine gunned everything and everybody.

Do you think they had any excuse for machine gunning?

No reason whatsoever. Because we had no arms, we had no-- and particularly women and children.

Did it surprise you that German troops should behave in this way?

Nothing surprised me.

You said that you were in hospital for 11 months.

Did you get proper treatment?

I had wonderful treatment. When I will-- I give credit where credit is due. And it may be because I spoke German that I-- well, I made contacts with particularly one doctor who was about-- probably a bit older than me. Yes, he was a-- because he told me that he was in the First World War also in Poland.

And he had actually some sort of a sentiment speaking to me. And I could only put it down because I spoke German. And on a number of visits, he talked to me. And I think he really-- and the other thing is this hospital was a convent hospital. And the nuns were absolutely wonderful. In fact, if I wouldn't be a Jew, I would become a Roman Catholic.

But was the hospital under German control?

Oh, yes, it was under German-- what's the name-- occupation. Or there were German doctors in uniforms. And they were also the Nazi nurses. But they did not attend to the prisoners of war. I'm talking about the Nazi nurses. In fact, there was one nurse there who got a little bit-- had a crush on one of the young officers, Polish officers. And she used to visit him.

And he used to tell me that-- because we're talking about Jews and nothing else. He's always had the impression that Jews must be different people, looking different, must have horns or something like it. Because he said, well, we got Jews here. But they never, ever entered the ward where Jews were.

Did you recover from your injuries?

I had several operations, mostly to remove splinters in my leg. And eventually, I was sent to prisoner of war camp because although I was in a hospital, I was a member of a prisoner of war camp. And all correspondence, whatever I had, had to go through the prisoner of war camp. And anything I sent home was also-- had to go through the usual channels, censored by the authorities of the prisoner of war. So when I was released from hospital, actually, I was released to a prisoner of war camp.

Which prisoner of war camp was it?

I don't remember.

Do you know where it was located, approximately?

It wasn't very far located from there, from the hospital, somewhere probably in Silesia. But I don't really remember. I never bothered, truthfully, and I wasn't very long there. From there, they have given me a pass to travel home.

What were conditions like in the POW camp?

Oh, this was quite-- not too bad-- well, considering what afterwards was in concentration camps. This was almost like a paradise. You had food. You had clothes. And you weren't beaten or forced to work.

Were-- was everybody in the POW camp given passes to go home?

No, only Jews.

Why was that? Did they tell you?

Yeah. They didn't tell you. But I know why-- afterwards, I knew why. Because if you were a prisoner of war--