

INTERVIEW WITH MR. HENRY ABRAMOWICZ
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Jewish Community Relations Council,
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HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q This is an interview with Henry Abramowicz for the JCRC-ADL Holocaust History Project, by Lynn Rosen, Minneapolis, June 14, 1982. Maybe you could just tell me a little about your family. When you were born, and where.

A: I was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1929. We lived in Lodz all our lives. I guess my father was born there, too. And my father had seven brothers and three sisters and they all lived in town. And my mother, she was born in Lodz, too, and she had three sisters and two brothers.

Q: What was his work?

A: We had a shoe store. My brother had the business and it was a private concern. My whole family worked there.

Q: You worked there, too?

A: I was only nine years old when the war broke out, so I didn't work, I went to school. I'm the youngest in the family. I had three older sisters. One was eight years older, that was the oldest, then six years older and four years older than I am.

Q: Were they involved in that?

A: No, they were still too young. They also attended school. And my father was very active in different social work, too. He was the vice president of the small companies - it's like the Small Business Administration, but it took care of only the Jewish businesses.

Q: What did they call it? Was there a Yiddish name for it?

A: They used to call it the Freinhendler Frein. And he was also very active in projects like for poor children, they collected money, and did this sort of work - social - you know, volunteer work.

Q: Was it a large Jewish community?

- A: There were about 300,000 Jewish people living in town. This was the second largest city in Poland. Warsaw was the biggest, although Warsaw didn't have any more Jewish people than Lodz, Lodz had 300,000 people, and I think Warsaw had around 300,000, too.
- Q: That's big. So there were many synagogues and...
- A: There were a lot of synagogues in Lodz. We could look out through our windows and see our synagogue, one of the nicest and grand synagogues in Poland.
- Q: How was it?
- A: It was quite an unusual structure. The Germans burned the synagogue. And I was still there when they did it. A lot of people used to visit Lodz simply because of the synagogue.
- Q: Was it one of these wooden ones?
- A: No. No, it wasn't a wooden one. In fact, I am almost certain, it was the nicest synagogue in Poland.
- Q: Did it have b-i-g windows, and...
- A: It was an unusual structure. It had beautiful windows. In fact, I remember my father used to tell me stories about it. They used to import special painters from Italy to do certain paintings in the synagogue. And that was kind of an unusual thing. But the synagogue was burned. They burned it - they bombed it! And during the night. It wasn't too far away from our house.
- Q: And you were there at the time?
- A: Yeah, I was there. I could see through the window what they did. Firebombs?
- They probably must have dynamited it. I don't know how they did it, but we heard a big, loud noise, must have been about 12 o'clock at night.
- Q: It must have shook the house.
- A: It shook the whole neighborhood. And we could see that the synagogue was burning. It must have been in November of 1939.
- Q: What events led up to that?
- A: No, it's just one of those things. You mentioned the synagogue. I guess the Germans had in mind to destroy all Jewish things, and synagogues were the first thing to destroy. At that time, nobody knew "why," or anything. The synagogue

was closed. Nobody used to go anymore. They wouldn't allow anybody to go into the synagogue. Rumors were that they...

Q: So it must have been when you were quite young that they burned it.

A: Yeah, I was about nine years old at the time. The Germans entered our city around the 10th of September. I guess the war started the 2nd. The 2nd of September, 1939, and they entered one week later and it must have been perhaps the month after that that they burned the synagogue.

Q: So they had taken over everything, but, ill

A: Oh, yeah! Poland was gone. Poland surrendered, what there was left of Poland. But nobody knew "why" they do these things. They did a lot of other things, too, but nobody could foresee or think that this was the first stage of destroying all the Jews!

Q: Did your family say anything to you?

A: Well, my father wasn't there. My father was in the army, a soldier. In 1939, he was 39 years old at that time, and they mobilized him, and he was in the Polish army. The Russians captured him. He was a prisoner of war in Russia. When they burned the synagogue, my father wasn't back yet, but he came back later, at the end of November, or the first week in December. But then he stayed only a few weeks, and he left again.

Q: So, was your mother alone?

A: My mother and my sisters were home in Lodz.

Q: And you had a close community, I suppose.

A: We lived in a Jewish community. Everybody was Jewish in the neighborhood, you know. When you talk about 300,000 Jewish people, and the whole town, the city, had perhaps 400,000 - 500,000 population, more than half of the population was Jewish.

Q: How would you describe your family, as far as religious observance, their style of Judaism?

A: My relatives were very religious. My great-grandfather was a rabbi. He was also a Rebbe. In fact, a lot of people still remember him. So my mother came from a very Orthodox family, and my father's family was also Orthodox, but my father and my mother, we were more or less Conservative. We still had kosher food, and this sort of thing; we used to go to synagogue, but my father would travel on

Saturday, for instance, and this sort of thing. We used to go to the synagogue every Saturday, and we had kosher, but we were not completely Orthodox.

Q: Was that pretty common, that sort of mixed Conservative...

A: I would say the majority of people were Conservative. Maybe not Conservative as you would say conservative here. I would imagine that anyone Conservative in Poland would have been an Orthodox person here.

Q: Did you speak Yiddish at home?

A: Yes, we spoke only Yiddish. First language. We all talked Yiddish. Yiddish is still my mother language.

Q: I wish I could conduct the interview in Yiddish. (Laughter) I'm learning a little bit. Did you have some contact with non-Jews?

A: Ah (sigh), very little. The only non-Jew was a janitor. I guess the janitor was a special job - it was a privileged job. A Jew couldn't have been a janitor even if you wanted to. We lived in a house, there were maybe 25 families.

Q: It must have been a big house.

A: Well, it wasn't really big. 25 families. We didn't have big apartments, you know. Family of six, lived maybe in one room. We had two rooms, so we were considered rich (laughter). So the janitor, it was a special privilege to be a janitor. He was the only gentile, and he could sell his janitorial trade. In other words, he wanted to move away, someone would have to buy it, but it had to be a gentile. A Jew couldn't have been a janitor. I suppose the reason for it was, because he had some sort of a book that he would write every name in the book, and you had to be registered in this book, and I guess the Poles maybe didn't trust the Jew to do this type of work.

Q: Interesting.

A: He was the only gentile that I knew. He had a few children and we played occasionally.

Q: He lived in the building?

A: There was a separate building. He didn't live in the main building, but next to it. I went to a Yiddish, Jewish, public school, a Polish school, but only for Jewish kids. We didn't live together with gentile children. A Jewish school for boys, only. Maybe 60% or 70% of the teachers were gentile. The principal was a gentile, too, even though it was a Jewish school. But other than that, I really didn't have too much contact. My Dad did, because we used to have a few

gentile people working for us, but this was the extent of gentile people. But gentile boys would beat us up every day.

Q: After school?

A: After school! Every day almost, so this was the contact with gentiles. When I went to school, we walked. It was about three, four miles away from home, and there were a lot of churches on the way - Polish churches. And each time we would walk by a church a lot of gentile children, they would each time yell.

Q: They knew you.

A: Well, no. The Polish people would see a Jew, they would know a Jew was a Jew. Somehow they could recognize, and we could, too. I could tell who's a gentile and who's a Jew, just by looking at the person, and they could, too. So when the school let out, and we were going home, they would beat us up or throw stones. This was an everyday situation.

Q: So you would just be ready for it.

A: Yeah, we were prepared to run - or fight. I never did fight. I had a cousin who was really good in fighting, and he went to the same school, and he would fight.

Q: So you didn't have friends who were gentiles.

A: No, we never had gentile friends. That's right. I never thought about it his way, but we never had gentile friends.

Q: So in the school, there was no kind of Jewish learning?

A: No. That was a public school. We had all just regular classes, and our curriculum was the regular curriculum, except we had "religion" - which they called "religion" - this was the Jewish religion, which they would teach us. This was a Jewish teacher who would teach us religion, in the Polish language. They didn't teach us in Yiddish, or anything like that. The school was only Polish, in the Polish language, but the subject which maybe pertained to us as far as Jewish was concerned was "religion."

Q: So that was your family's choice to send you there?

A: Well, this was perhaps not our choice, but we couldn't afford to go to private school, because we were well-to-do people, but we were not this rich. In order to send children to a private school, one had to be really extremely wealthy people.

Q: A private school would be a Jewish?

- A: You could have private schools where you could be taught by Jewish teachers. They could still teach Polish and everything, but they would teach you Hebrew. And there were Hebrew schools, too. I used to go to a Heder after school, and they would teach us how to dovin and pray in Hebrew. But it wasn't Hebrew as a language, it was Hebrew just to be able to read from the siddur.
- Q: So you went there.
- A: I started when I was about five or six years old, learning to read.
- Q: And it would be every day after school? Everyone would go?
- A: Oh, yes. Almost everyone. Some people would have a Rabbi coming home to teach, to tutor. I would say the majority of kids would go to heder, like 90%.
- Q: Did you like it or not like it, one way or another?
- A: Well, it was different, because they were all Jewish kids, the school was also Jewish, there was a Jewish rabbi with a beard, (laughter) and I liked it.
- Q: Were there other instances of names being called, being beat up as a common thing? How about for your family or the rest of your family in their dealings?
- A: It was the same thing. Except girls were a little better off. Boys didn't dare to beat girls. They would say, "Oh, she's a Jew," but I remember one time my sister was walking and one Pole went by and said, "She's a Jewess, but she is not rotten." that was a Polish expression. If she was a good looking girl, that's what he said. If she would be ugly, he would add some degrading word. But there was something, always something.
- Q: And the Polish girls - would they say things?
- A: Well, I don't know, because girls wouldn't beat me up. But I remember this one time my sister told me this story, where she worked, and these people yelled at her. But I think the girls didn't have so much of a problem.
- Q: And for your parents in the business world?
- A: Well, in the business world. They tried to tell the Polish people not to buy from the Jewish merchants, to boycott the Jewish people, if they could. But it was difficult to boycott simply because the Jewish people offered their merchandise cheaper than the Polish people did. And you know, that's the reason they still could stay in business.
- Q: You're talking about all the time pre-war, pre-1939?

- A: Pre-1939. But it wasn't easy. The only thing that they could compete is simply because they were more efficient, I suppose.
- Q: The Jewish businessmen.
- A: Yes. They could sell for less. We had a lot of Polish people buying from us. They themselves wouldn't sell to Jews, but they would come to us at night, sometimes, and buy merchandise. They had signs on the stores saying, "Here is a Pole who doesn't buy from Jews." (Quotes the Polish saying.) But he would come to buy from us, and he would have his own store. He wouldn't come during the day. Afraid somebody could see him perhaps.
- Q: So in that sense we don't know how long that was going on, maybe all the time, since you were born.
- A: I would imagine this must have been going on all along, because my father would tell me stories. All the years. But we lived in a Jewish neighborhood, so we didn't have to do too much with gentiles. It wasn't a ghetto, it was a Jewish neighborhood. There were Polish neighborhoods. I think the center of the city, or most of the center of the city, were Jewish. And on the periphery, that's where the gentile neighborhoods were.
- Q: So, when the war came, you were...
- A: When the war started, I was in Lodz. My father, as I told you already, was in the army. He was mobilized about a month before the war started. He was stationed about 30 or 40 miles in a little town near Lodz. My mother and I visited him, about a month before the war started, but then after the war started, we didn't hear from him again until he came back.
- Q: So, what do you remember about that?
- A: Well, I remember, before the war, everybody thought Poland's going to win. We were convinced that we're gonna win the war. And I say "we," the Jewish people, even though they were in Poland, very much what you would call, second-class citizens. There was no question about it. In the army you got to be a soldier, maybe to be a sergeant but you couldn't be, let's say, general or a colonel. They were not allowed. We couldn't do a lot of things in Poland, but nevertheless, we felt pretty patriotic about Poland. I myself, I really felt patriotic. I would fight, if I were drafted, for Poland, and the feeling was there. The radio came every day that we were going to win the war, and England and France came to help. I remember the comments that England "helped" and France "started." I guess they declared war on the Germans. And we were sure that we were going to win the war.
- Q: Everyone was optimistic.

A: Everybody was optimistic. And we were digging trenches. In fact, the Jewish people were digging trenches very diligently. I was digging trenches, too.

Q: Did other activities stop then?

A: Well, the only activity to stop with me, is that I didn't go to school anymore. We were supposed to start school in September and I did go to school, but there was nobody there.

Q: You walked to school?

A: I walked to school. There was nobody there. I met a few other people, and they didn't know what's going to happen. There was no principal. The principal was in the army. he was a major. So, I came home and I said, "There's nobody in school." This was the last time I went to school. I never went back, I guess. And we didn't know what's going to happen. But one week later, the Germans occupied our town. I think around the 10th. It didn't take more than a week. It was on a Saturday.

Q: So it was only one week that you were optimistic?

A: Yes. It was on a Saturday. I remember that. On Shabbos morning we looked out the windows and I saw columns of tanks and artillery moving along the streets. The Polish army ran. About two or three days later they escaped. We could see that they'd been escaping. They were very poorly prepared. They ran, on horses. The Germans came on trucks - half tracks, motorized. There was no contest. But the Polish population was very optimistic. In fact, what I heard, the general, the head of the Polish army, he said that we were going to win the war, and everybody believed him.

Q: They wanted the people to be optimistic.

A: Well, yes. The first week when the Germans came in, I didn't think in terms of anything to worry about. I never thought that it was going to be any different than it was. But I didn't go to school. Our business wasn't completely shot, we still did some business. People would come in and buy shoes from us, stores were still open. The currency, as I remember, was still good - Polish currency. But there was something different. For some reason there was no more stability in town. Nobody knew what's going to happen. Of course, I remember, I stood in front of the door, and a lot of the Germans walked by, and they looked at us, and they saw we were Jewish. The Germans couldn't tell who was a Jew, who was a Pole, and I remember that this German drove by and he said, "You are Jews?" And we said, "Yes." And he said, "A bad time is coming to you." He knew, you know.

Q: You were kids.

A: We were kids. And we had a few Germans who told us we should escape. We had a lot of German people who did do with us business. Five or ten percent, I think, people living there were Germans. And we had a few people that would come to us, and said we should escape. My father wasn't home. The second time my father came - from Russia - she and my father, then, together went back to Russia, and we stayed home, my three sisters and I. And this guy came and he said that we should escape if we can.

Q: And who was this guy?

A: He was a German, but he lived in Poland. He could speak Polish. Probably he knew more than anybody else - than we knew, anyway - and he said, "If I would be you, I would." He didn't tell us what's going to happen or anything like this, but he says we should escape if we can. And we did.

Q: You decided it was time.

A: Well, it wasn't because so much what he said, but it was because my father went to Russia. But it wasn't really Russia! Poland was divided, maybe you know about it. After the war, the Russians took half of it and the Germans took half of it. So, the Russian half, which is where my father was, he left. After the war, the Russian people had told the Jewish soldiers, "Go." They kept the Poles, but they let the Jewish people go, so he came back, by foot. They wouldn't allow Jews to travel on trains; the only thing you could do was walk. So he walked all the way from Bialystok, about 250 miles, a long distance. Well, at that time, we didn't know that the Germans are out to destroy the Jewish people, but the rumors were that all the leaders are being taken first. Anybody who did anything they removed. Anybody who was anybody, the Germans took right away. So when my father came, my mother told him, "You've gotta leave right away." And he did! He stayed about a day or two, and he left, went back.

Q: Because he had been a leader?

A: He was involved in many Jewish things in Lodz.

Q: They would know his name.

A: And they would know his name. And so he left. And then my mother went after that. My sisters and I stayed in Lodz, and we had money. Anybody who didn't have any money couldn't do anything.

Q: This was in '39?

A: This was in '39, in about November. I think it must have been December that - it wasn't a decision of mine, I was just too young to do anything - but my two oldest sisters hired somebody who had a horse and buggy and it took us about two, three days to go to Warsaw. Between Lodz and Warsaw, there was a border. Lodz, our town, was considered the German Reich, and beyond that was considered still Poland. So, we escaped by horse and buggy to Warsaw.

Q: Why did you think of that?

A: Well, (sigh) a lot of people escaped this way. There were hundreds and hundreds of people leaving at that time. It still was possible to do. This was right before Christmas, the second week of December, or maybe the third week in December. So my sisters and I, we came to Warsaw, and in Warsaw we had friends. My father did business in Warsaw. We knew all these people. And we stayed there for about a week. There was no ghetto. You could walk free, but nobody dared, really, to go any place, and...

Q: It wasn't occupied yet?

A: Oh, yeah. it was occupied. The Germans were there.

Q: So what did you say was the border?

A: It was a border, but you could cross it, and nobody did anything to us. Now this was just a very temporary time, because, as I heard, about a week or two weeks later, after we crossed, they closed this border, and they didn't allow anybody to escape any more. So we were just lucky to cross at that time. So once we came to Warsaw, we stayed. Then my father sent some people from the Russian side to bring us over. We had to cross, then, Russia.

Q: So you were in touch?

A: We were not in touch. He knew where we were going to be, and he sent somebody, and we had to pay them, we had to paper every hand to smuggle us through. So my oldest sister and I stayed in Warsaw and my two middle sisters went first. And then about a week later my oldest sister and I crossed the border.

Q: Also by horse?

A: No. We walked a little bit farther after Warsaw, across the Vistula, and we stayed in Praga, another town, a suburb, I guess, of Warsaw. From there we took a train. They would allow us to take a train. And this was all arranged. We went on train to Radom, a little town, and from there we went by horse and buggy again, and we walked, until we crossed the Donets river.

Q: Were the four of you together then?

A: No. Just my sister and I. And we had to cross the river, I guess by boat. I don't remember now. We crossed this river, and then the Russians were there.

Q: And you were alone?

A: We were going in a group of about 20 people. See, there were smugglers - this was a business - they would, let's say, charge you 300 zlotys, which is like dollars, perhaps, for a head. They would smuggle like 20 people, 30 people. I don't know how they did it. Maybe they paid Germans or whatever, but they were able to get groups like us across the border. This was just a little time, eleven months. When we came to cross the border, I remember that another fellow, a friend of ours, still lived in Bialystok, which is on the Russian side, and he was one of those guys who would smuggle people through. He tried to make another trip and they caught him, and he could never escape again. In 1940, after we crossed, they closed the borders. After that you couldn't.

Q: So it was in December of '39?

A: I say December, because I remember that it was Christmas. I remember a lot of Polish people that put up Christmas trees. We visited Polish farmers along the way.

Q: How was that?

A: They were fairly friendly at that time to us.

Q: They knew what you were doing?

A: They knew what's going on. They would give us milk and food. We would stay about a night in a place and go. Warsaw was the first step. Then from Warsaw we went to several different towns until we went to Bialystok. Before the war it was Poland, but during the war and after the war, the Russian side took it. And then there was freedom again. You know, in the beginning, the Germans came out with that you had to wear a kind of yellow band. This was the first thing they did, like about a month after the Germans came in. Then you had to wear a Star of David on the front of your apparel. When I came to Russia, I still had it. The Russian soldiers looked at it and said, "What is that?"

Q: They didn't know?

A: No. They didn't know that.

Q: So, was it maybe freer than it had even been for you before the war, living in Lodz?

A: Yes. I must say "yes." When I came to Bialystok I felt I had more freedom than I had even before in Poland. Yes, I did feel that way, 'cause I didn't know what we were getting into. But to start out with, there was no fear or anything.

Q: And there were other people from...

A: There were a lot of people from the other side of the border. They were called "bieznik," which means we were displaced people, or runners.

Q: People from your town?

A: From my town, or from the other side - from the German side.

Q: So, how as it set up there, as far as your living?

A: Well, when we came, everybody had to make a living any way he could, and my dad, I don't what he did, but I think he was doing all kind of business. He was selling, and buying and selling. What else can a Jew do here today? And he could just support us. there was a Russian school, and I went to school for a little while, and then - my father was a Polish citizen, and the Russians wanted my dad to become a Russian citizen, and he didn't want to, I don't know why , so this was the reason they sent us to Siberia. It's north. So this is when we were saved, really. This was the only reason that we were saved. This was in 1940.

Q: Could you say what month?

A: This was in the summer. It must have been perhaps in June. And about 4 o'clock in the morning, some KGB people came in and told us we had about a half hour, and they put us in cattle trains, and it took us seven days until we got to the destination. And this is really what saved our lives, because, when the Germans started the war with Russia in 1941, it took them about one or two days and they were there, and nobody could escape at that time. but we were so far in Russia that they didn't get to us.

Q: How was it that you were sent there?

A: As I told you, the reason the Russians sent us is because my dad didn't want to become a Russian citizen. And there were a lot of people like this. A lot of people became Russian citizens, and you could stay there. But the people who didn't want to be Russian citizens, - they were considered, I guess, an undesirable element - and they were sent to - it was called a Handersoblast. It's up north. And we lived there for about 14 months.

Q: And those were the ones who were saved in the end?

A: Those were the ones - if they could survive in Siberia. A lot of people died. No, I shouldn't say a lot. I remember a few people dying, young people. But still, nothing compares to the people in the ghettos, in the concentration camps.

Q: Did you hear of what happened to other people in the outside?

A: Well, yes and no. I had an uncle who lived in a little town north of Lodz, and he came to our town, but we were gone already when he came, and he moved in our house and he lived in our apartment, and they killed him, he and his wife. They had two daughters.

Q: Your cousins?

A: My cousins. And only one girl survived out of these, and she still lives in Poland, now, in Warsaw. She's married to a professor. he teaches at the University of Warsaw. We got a letter from them once in Russia, and the letter said that we don't know how lucky we are that we could escape. And he asked that we should send him something to eat.

Q: Others of your relatives?

A: My father had six brothers, I told you in the beginning, six brothers. They all died. None of them survived. And my aunts all died, too. And the same thing goes for my mother's relatives. They all lived in Lodz. We were the only family who escaped. So, our family stayed intact - my father, my mother, and the four children. But some cousins did survive. We had a very big family, because you know, everybody had four or five children. So I had one cousin who was in the Lodz ghetto, he survived. he now lives in Israel. And I have another cousin who was in the ghetto and he lives now in New York. And his sister survived, too, so they had two. Then I have two other cousins living in Chicago. These are all the survivors. And from my mother's side, there was one cousin - my mother's sister's son - he survived. He had two brothers, they all died. he was the only one who survived, and he lives in New York, too. And then I have another cousin who lives in Israel - he survived, too - so there are two in Israel and four in New York - in the United States - from the whole relation. We had a family of, I would say, about 150 cousins and aunts, uncles, and second cousins.

Q: Did you talk to them about escaping at the time when you left Lodz?

A: Yes, we did. Let me share some stories. This fellow who lives in New York, his brother went with my father to Warsaw, and then he came back. He didn't want to go any farther. And he didn't survive. And I had an uncle, he was really a bright man, an inventor. He was my mother's brother. My father begged him to go, and he said, "No. I don't care. I don't have to worry." He didn't think he had to go.

Q: People didn't want to leave their lives.

A: Nope. In fact, he made fun of people. "Where are you gonna go?" he used to make jokes, anybody who's going is crazy.

Q: Was it thought that whatever would happen to them would eventually happen to the ones who escaped?

A: Nobody could see this. There is a Polish joke, they used to call it Bialyspeek, and Bialyspeek means a person who has something stupid in his mind. So they would tell us that if you go, you escape, you're crazy. What did you know?

Q: But your family had enough encouragement, or enough...

A: Well, my mother thought we should stay. We heard that my father's dead, or something about his leg. There were all kinds of rumors, and there was no mail or anything. And finally he came home, and whew! She immediately changed, and said, "You better leave right away." The following day or two days later he left. And I think this is the only reason we all left. We couldn't foresee anything terrible is going to happen, but, because of his position, he had to go, and so we all went. After the war, I met a few people from our town. In fact, a friend of mine, he was my neighbor - he was a little older than I, and that's why he survived, I guess - and he told me about a lot of things, about my uncle. And he saw a few of our friends being shot right in front of town. But we didn't know anything of this sort. We couldn't believe it happened. After the war, I thought, when I get home I have to tell him a lot of stories about Russia. How bad it was, and this sort of thing. It was what I was going to tell him.

Q: Did you go back?

A: I never went back to Lodz. My dad did. When we came back from Russia, my father went back, and that's where he met my cousin - the one who did survive.

Q: What was it like in Siberia?

A: Well, you know, being a youngster, I guess, nothing is bad, really. I didn't have to work. I went to school. But my father and my sisters had to work. And life wasn't good. We lived in a place just as cold as Minnesota. We had no heating. In fact, the water would freeze in the house. The only reason we survived is because we had some nice feather beds from the old country, so at least we could sleep. And we didn't have enough winter clothes or food. But in comparison to the camps - to the ghettos - it was still good. I went to school, I used to go every day. We didn't have good food, but still we could survive.

Q: What was the work? What did they make you do?

- A: You had to cut wood, cut hay - this sort of work. Menial work. Where we were, that was a camp for criminals, in a way. Political criminals. If you are a Russian, and if you say you don't want to be a citizen, you could be considered a criminal. They never had children at these places - only older people, without children - but this was an exception. I guess they didn't know where to put us, so they sent us there. It wasn't the worst thing. We could survive, you know.
- Q: So your family was together?
- A: Yeah, we were all together.
- Q: How were you housed?
- A: We had one room - about the size of this room, maybe - where we lived, all of us, six people. And we had a little stove - wood - would warm it up. There was no insulation. It was cold!
- Q: You wore a lot of clothes?
- A: We didn't have good clothes. Life wasn't easy there for anybody.
- Q: So you were getting to be a young man. And you would go to school and the others would work and you could get food. You could shop?
- A: No. In Russia you couldn't buy things. They give it to you - for money - and you get so much per person, bread, whatever it is. There was no variety or anything of this sort. It was whatever they give you. So some days you had bread, some other times you had butter. I guess butter was almost never available, like milk was never available. We never had milk. Children never had milk. I wasn't a child anymore, but I remember there were younger children than I, and they never had milk.
- Q: You say there weren't many children, but there were some?
- A: Oh, yeah, there were a lot of children there. Younger children, I'd say, about three year olds, four year olds. I wonder how they did it. I guess even a thirteen year old child needs milk, too, but it's not as crucial as it is for younger children.
- Q: And did they have any meat or such?
- A: Occasionally we had meat - on holidays or this sort of thing. As a rule, there was no meat. But once in a while we'd have some meat. It wasn't a balanced diet, let me tell you. But people could help themselves. There were rivers, and we went fishing, and we could catch birds, we had ducks. I would catch a lot of fish, and I used to catch ducks, too. We could even have a little garden. We had enough. We lived there for about fourteen months, and the summers are very

short, but we were able to put up a garden, and we had potatoes and this sort of thing in the summertime.

Q: How many people would you say were there?

A: Well, our camp, it wasn't the only camp. I would say the whole area had about 4,000 people.

Q: And it was both - criminals - well, they used to be called criminals - Russians and...

A: Well, before we came, the criminals lived there, but I guess they put them someplace else. Then they put us in there. Actually, when we came, they put us in barns. The first day was in a barn. Everyone had a stall just like we were a horse!

Q: Was it just Jews?

A: These were only Jewish people. The Polish people, they'd separate. they wouldn't put Polish and Jewish together - even though we're all Polish citizens. I don't know in different camps, but in our camp, there were only Jewish people.

Q: Did people come and go?

A: You couldn't come and go. It was restriction - all you could do would be to be in the camp. You were not supposed to leave the camp. If you did leave the camp, you had to have a special permit, but they would never allow anybody to leave anyway. There was an uprising at one time. Some people - they didn't realize what Russia is - and I remember that there was a fellow by the name of Yacha Morish - at one time I heard he was a Communist - he organized a group. They were going to escape from Siberia, and they took about three horses and they went to look for a road. To escape from Siberia was like to escape from the moon! Finally, he came back, and fell from the horse, and then the NKVD people came, and they beat everybody up. They didn't do anything to us, we were just inside, the children. And they put him in jail, this guy - he got about ten years in jail - and most of these leaders that did the uprising. The uprising wasn't set up against the Soviet Union, just trying to escape. There's no such a thing as to escape from there.

Q: Was he a Jew?

A: He was a Jew, yeah. I heard he died in jail. In 1941, the Russian government allowed us to leave Siberia. All of us left. The Polish government intervened. There was a Polish government in Russia, started there when Germany declared war on Russia. Then to be a Polish citizen wasn't so bad any more. So they let

us go. We could go anyplace that we wanted to, in Russia. So we went to Ulyannas. It's on the Volga.

Q: Did you talk with friends? Did you have some peers - other than boys your age?

A: Oh, sure. I had probably a dozen friends.

Q: What did you think when you were there - how long you would be there?

A: We didn't know. We didn't believe that this would be forever. Nobody did believe that. We thought it was just a temporary thing. In fact, after the war broke out, we were glad we were there.

Q: But you didn't really know what was happening...

A: We didn't realize. A lot of Russian people said people who come here always stay here, don't leave anymore. They would tell us this. I guess they needed the Polish people - their friends - to make friendship with the Polish government. They had a Polish army, too. I guess this is why everybody who was a Polish citizen became more or less, what you would say, vindicated. So we were able to leave.

Q: When you went, did everyone leave at that time?

A: From there, everybody. 100%. Nobody would stay there. But people went to different places, to different places in Russia. We stayed in Vyanaska oblast - it's a little place next to the Volga - for five, six years, until '45. I went to school, and my father was in the Russian army, mobilized. Then, after the war, they let us go back to Poland.

Q: Your school, was it a Russian school?

A: Yes.

Q: A small town?

A: It was a little village, a little country town.

Q: And you learned Russian?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: You speak many languages.

A: Well, not by choice. (Laughter)

Q: So, were there other Jewish families?

A: Yes. We were perhaps 20 Jewish families where we lived. Then when we could leave for Poland, everybody left. We all left together.

Q: How would you travel then?

A: Then we traveled by train. This was the nicest trip - home.

Q: So this was also the longest place that you had stayed.

A: This was the longest place we stayed. That's right. We stayed about five years there.

Q: So, then they said that people could come back, but you said you didn't go to Lodz.

A: No. The war was over, and they allowed us to leave for home. Home was Poland. Being a Polish citizen, we didn't have to stay. My father had a first cousin who did become a Russian citizen, and did survive, too. He had to stay in Russia. They wouldn't allow him to leave. I remember we met him on the way, and my father said to him, why don't you come, and we'll smuggle you through. He didn't dare to do that, and he stayed in Russia. But they allowed us to go, so we went back home. Then we came here.

Q: Where did you go back to?

A: We went to a little town called Klatsko. It used to be Germany before the war, but after the war it was annexed to Poland. We stayed there about six months. Then we went to Germany.

Q: Was there a place to stay?

A: Well, they would give us, yes. They would treat us good. A lot of Germans escaped when the Russian army occupied all this area, so there were a lot of apartments. They would give us an apartment where Germans lived before, and we lived there the best we had in many, many years. We stayed about six months, and then they put me in jail. It was an interesting thing. I was 15, so I was as tall as I am now - so for Poland, I was considered a tall fellow. I was six feet tall. And I didn't have a passport. You had to have a passport if you worked there, some sort of document, if you're 18. I looked maybe like 18, and I was working at that time with a friend of mine, and he was older, he was 18. He had a document. The Polish police would check documents, and I didn't have any, so they put me in jail, with criminals. He went home to tell my dad that they put me in jail. So my father came to get me out, tell them I was only 16. So after

this, I told my dad, "I'm not going to stay any longer. And we decided right then and there to leave. And then we left. A lot of people left at that time.

Q: Were you still together with your sisters?

A: No. All my sisters were married. Two sisters were married in Russia, and one of my sisters married in Platisviel, a little town in Germany.

Q: When you came back then, and you saw things that had happened, it was a surprise to everyone?

A: It was a surprise to everybody. It's a shock. First of all, the whole family was gone. We knew that if we wouldn't have escaped, this would have happened to us, too. And we could have been killed twice. First, if we wouldn't have escaped, and second, even if we would have escaped, if my dad would have become a Russian citizen, they would have caught us at that time. So it was twice that my chance we were able to survive. In this respect, it is almost fate.

Q: So, you feel like a lucky one.

A: Well...not lucky. I wouldn't say lucky. I don't know.

Q: So then how did you spend your time afterwards?

A: You had to do something, so I decided to go to school. I studied at the University.

Q: For a long time?

A: For five years.

Q: Where in Germany?

A: Giessen.

Q: Was it a small town?

A: Giessen is about 40,000 population. I stayed there for five years and graduated there as a veterinarian. I applied also to study medicine, and I was accepted, and I studied medicine for three years in Munich. They had a quota in order to come to Americans from Poland and I didn't know how long it would take me to get there. My father and my mother went to live in this country, they went to New York.

Q: When did they come over?

A: They came here in 1952, I think. And so I studied medicine, and then my quota came. I had my choice to go or stay, and I thought, I'm going to go. So I came here in 1954.

Q: Could you go other places?

A: I could go anyplace, I guess. What do you mean?

Q: To Israel?

A: Yeah. I coulda gone. My father and my mother lived in New York, and my sisters lived in New York. I had one sister in Israel.

Q: Have you been there?

A: No.

Q: So when you came over then, did you live with...

A: I lived with my folks - my father, and my mother.

Q: And they were working in...

A: My father worked. It wasn't the greatest. My father came from being a big businessman to work in a factory. But he didn't complain. He liked it. But then my mother died and my father died.

Q: What year?

A: My father died in 1960. My mother in '56.

Q: Did you stay with them?

A: I was there when my mother died, but I wasn't there when my father died. I came to Minnesota about the end of 1969.

Q: And by then you were how old?

A: Well, I was about 30.

Q: Were there many people coming here?

A: To Minnesota?

Q: Yeah.

- A: No. The only reason I came is to get a job with the government. I work for the federal government. that's why I came here. Otherwise I wouldn't be here.
- Q: And you met your wife here?
- A: I met my wife here and got married, and we have five children. One of my daughters is studying at Columbia University. She wants to be a doctor. It's her second year now. And my son is going to St. Thomas school. He wants to be a veterinarian. He's a first year. And I have another son and two daughters.
- Q: Great. How is your contact here with the Jewish community?
- A: Well, we belong to Temple of Aaron.
- Q: Are there many people from your past that you're still in contact with?
- A: You mean from Poland? Yes. I have a friend, he's a physician in Minneapolis, and he went through the same thing I did. Very much the same - stayed in Russia. Very similar situation. And there are a few other people I know from Poland.
- Q: Are there any things that you keep from that time? Any photographs?
- A: Well, when we escaped from Poland during the war, we left everything! We had a big store, and hundreds of shoes. It was worth a lot of money, and I looked at my father and I said, "How came you leave all this stuff?" We left everything. We had nothing except for one picture. We had one picture, which was my sister's, I guess. For some reason she had it and we made a big picture out of it, and I still have it. That was the only picture from the old country that we had. Would you like to see it?
- Q: I'd love to.
- A: She made a big picture, and it's very old.
- Q: An inch by an inch!
- A: It was a very tiny picture. And this was my father, and that's my uncle, that's my aunt, that's my three sisters, and that's myself.
- Q: And when was this picture taken?
- A: This was in Poland. I guess it must have been in 1930. This was the only thing - it was all scratched up - like when you carry a picture in your wallet for 15 years. We were fortunate to make this picture. This was in the country - about three,

four miles from Lodz. We used to go there every summer, like a summer home. We didn't own a summer home, but we would rent.

Q: It's nice. it's good, good to have. Was there anything else you want to say - just your own feelings or thoughts - how it is for you now - say, with your family? Your daughters? Do you talk about the past at all?

A: Well, no, I don't really. I don't talk too much about the past, with them. They don't now anything about that. To them, you know, this really doesn't mean much. They wouldn't understand anything. There's no point of talking, trying to explain - there's no sense for comprehension. An American cannot understand it.

Q: Do you feel that?

A: Well, I think so. I think the only person who can understand that is one who was there.

Q: So you wouldn't try to tell it - when they were older?

A: Well, I try to tell my kids other things which they would learn, is not to be cowards. Like my son, for instance, he is going to be a black belt. Like on television - always able to defend yourself - he's a brown belt now.

Q: In karate.

A: In karate. And he's eighteen. And he's not scared of anybody. he wouldn't let anybody beat him up. And my little fellow, he's seven. He's a brown belt. Also, they're very proud of Israel. They were in Israel - almost everybody.

Q: Individually?

A: Individually. Yes. And in a way, they sympathize with the people who went through all this stuff. And I guess, they hear sometimes - they hear stories - but I don't really tell 'em too much about it.

Q: And your wife?

A: I did tell her about these things, but you know, she was born here. And I somehow don't think that people really like to hear these things.

Q: It's hard. I think it would be hard in the family, you know, and people make their own decisions about what's best to do.

A: That's right. People should remember. People should never forget. It's good that we have books and movies and this sort of thing. I really think everybody

should remember - including people who were never there. I think we all learned a good lesson from this. I think people probably hope for the best and then prepare for the worst. I think anything would happen in Germany at that time is a thing can only happen once. I really don't believe it could happen again. It can happen again, but people are not going to let it happen!

Q: It feels safer now.

A: Sure it is. They can still kill people and still do things, but it won't be easy. I think it will be harder to do it.

Q: I think so. I think a lot of people know now. Partly, I think that's a reason people want to know. (Sigh) This completes the interview with Henry Abramowicz by Lynn Rosen on June 14, 1982.