

Interview with Mr. Max Grosblat
By Riv-Ellen Prell
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Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is June 24, 1981, and I'm at the home of Max Grosblat, and this is Riv-Ellen Prell. I want to begin by asking you a set of questions just about your background in general, so where you were born, in what town and country?

A: I was born in Dubno, Poland, that was Polish Ukraine.

Q: In what year?

A: 1922. March 7, 1922.

Q: What size of a town was Dubno?

A: I would say it was about 60 to 70,000 Jewish people.

Q: What was the nearest big city that people lived in?

A: The nearest big city was Rovno and the next big city was Lutsk, which had about 500,000 people. Rovno had about 300,000 people. The area where I lived is mostly agriculture and a lot of fruits. They had apples, pears and a lot of orchards. We used to ship even to all over Poland from that part of the country. And a lot of eggs, poultry producing eggs. We used to ship into Warsaw, to Lodz. It was a very rich, agricultural part of Poland. The Polish Ukraine is famous for its agriculture.

Q: What were your parents' names?

A: My Dad's name was David, and he was a cantor in a synagogue. My mother's name was Feige. I don't know if there is any name in the English to translate Feige.

Q: And your name was Grosblat.

A: In fact, in Poland, it was with a "j" in the middle. Grojsblat. Like you see in the Swedish name with a "j" in there, but we dropped it out because it was so hard to when we first came in, to start telling with a "j" in the middle.

Q: Did you know your grandparents?

A: Yes, I did. One of my grandfathers was a Chaim and he lived forty miles away from our town -- a small little town.

Q: Was he a Grosblat?

A: He was a Grosblat. And the other grandfather was Benjamin Ludler and he lived in our town. He was a meshkiach, so he was with the rabbi. And Benjamin, my grandfather passed away before the Nazis, before the war started. But the other grandfather, Chaim, perished in the Holocaust.

Q: Do you know your grandmothers' names too?

A: Yes. They both passed away before the Holocaust. Chaya was one grandmother's name and the other grandma's, I can't recall right now.

Q: Chaya was the Grosblat?

A: Yes. The other name I can't recall.

Q: And do you know any farther back from that?

A: No, not farther than my grandparents.

Q: Do you know where your parents and grandparents were born?

A: (Sigh) In that general area of Poland, but it might not have been Dubno. Their parents or grandparents, when they had the Crusaders in Germany start after the Jewish people, they moved and settled in Poland. That's what I heard from their conversations.

Q: You said your father was a chazan. And what was his father?

A: His father was a tailor. Like custom-made tailor. You used to go in and he'd take your size and do it from scratch. My father was also a tailor, but he was a chazan and a tailor, both. And believe me, he needed another occupation to make a living there! (Laughter)

Q: But his primary income was from tailoring?

A: Tailoring, yes. And as a chazan, during the High Holidays, he usually got hired out, synagogue, but he was not on a steady income from that.

Q: Did he have formal training to be a chazan?

- A: Not really. Everybody went to Hebrew school. And if you had a voice, you could become a cantor. He had a nice voice so he became a cantor. But I don't think he had formal training for it.
- Q: Did your mother work?
- A: No. She had five children to take care of, so it was quite a job.
- Q: Which number are you of the five?
- A: I'm the oldest.
- Q: What languages were spoken in your home?
- A: We spoke Yiddish.
- Q: Did anyone know Polish?
- A: Yes. We went to Polish school. I also spoke some Ukrainian. In fact my dad knew quite a few languages. He knew German, he knew Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, because most of the clientele were Ukrainians, Czech people, Russian people. So he spoke to them in their own language.
- Q: But at home you only spoke Yiddish to one another. And your grandparents, too?
- A: Yiddish.
- Q: I find this question a funny one, but was your family secular or religious?
- A: My grandfather was very religious, and my family was religious also. I am secular.
- Q: But in Poland you were religious.
- A: Yes, I was religious. I didn't eat no ham. Didn't eat butter with meat, or stuff like that.
- Q: Did your father work on the Sabbath ever?
- A: No. He never worked on the Sabbath.
- Q: You said there were 10,000 Jews. That's a lot. Does that mean there were many synagogues?
- A: Yes. Quite a few synagogues.

Q: Did your family belong to one little one?

A: Oh, yes. It was called the Hasidisha Synagogue. Some of them were called the Triska, some of them were called the Triskasidim, some of them were called the Quoisushear -- all different sects of Hasidism that had their own synagogue. Right off hand I can think of one, two, three, four, five, six, about seven synagogues. I might have missed some too. And each synagogue had their own cantor and their own rabbi.

Q: Do you know what distinguished your family's Hasidic shul from any other?

A: Well they were members of a Hasidic sect. I can't remember the rabbi's name that we were following, but my grandfather followed him, so naturally my father followed him, and then I followed him.

Q: Can you tell me about the kind of Jewish education that you got growing up there?

A: Well, I had a good Jewish education. I could read the Talmud, I could read the Torah. I went to a Yeshiva.

Q: How old were you when you did that?

A: Oh, about fourteen, fifteen years old.

Q: Did you leave your town to do that?

A: No, our town had quite a few Yeshivas. First it started out with a heder, and then we had a secular school, after the heder. We went to secular school to learn Polish, and then after I finished the heder, I went to Yeshiva.

Q: I want to now ask you some questions about how you became aware of the outbreak of the war. The first question I want to ask you: What were the major events that you were aware of from about the mid-1930s -- that decade from '35 to about '41?

A: Well what was going on in Germany, we listened to the radios, we read in the paper, and then we met some people that the Germans expelled from Germany, because they were not German citizens, they were Polish citizens, so as they came back. We heard from them what was happening in Germany.

Q: Were they people from your town?

A: Some of them were from our town; in fact, some of them stayed with us when they came back. They didn't have a place to stay.

- Q: Were there any events locally -- in your town or region?
- A: Besides a fight between the Ukrainians and the Jewish groups, there wasn't anything of significance. But anti-Semitism in our town -- we knew we had to stay away from the church after Sunday services, because when they came out of the services, all they were looking for was Jews to start a fight.
- Q: Did your family have contacts with the gentiles? Did you, for example? Did your father do business with gentiles?
- A: Most of our customers were gentiles. In our town they used to come to the city, sell their agriculture products, and buy some material to make clothes. And they used to come into our house, and we used to talk their language. Some of them didn't have enough money to pay, so they used to bring some agriculture products to pay for it.
- Q: Did you exchange information about the war in Germany with them?
- A: (Sigh) We did not talk any politics or anything like that with the gentile people. What we talked about, it was just whatever he wants to have, a suit or pants or a jacket. Business. That's all we talked with them. We never talked any politics.
- Q: The next question you in some way already responded to, and that is what kind of encounters you had with anti-Semitism.
- A: Well, like I said, there were some groups -- not all of them -- but some groups were picking on Jews, and we were a bunch of rough Jewish guys in there too. We never stepped away from a fight, so we used to have fights with some of those roughnecks. I used to come home with a black eye. And we already knew what was happening.
- Q: Did you have relatives who lived outside of that region that you described?
- A: Yes. I had, in the city of Lusk, an uncle -- my mother's brother. In our town I had two uncles and two aunts.
- Q: Do you know what happened to them during the war?
- A: Well, one aunt left before the war. She is in Israel now. And the rest of them perished in the Holocaust.
- Q: Did you ever serve in the military in Poland?
- A: No, I did not serve in the military. But I joined the underground. They called it the Partisan group.

Q: That's what I want to talk to you about next. From the sheet you filled out, it said that you were in a ghetto for a year. What year was that?

A: Our part of the country, when the war started in 1939, the Russians took over. The Germans took over part -- and our part, where we lived, the Russians came in September, 1939. We were two years under the Russians until the war started between Russia and Germany. So the Germans came in in '41 -- on June 24, I think. Right away they ordered all the Jewish people to move into a certain area which was south of the city, near a river, and they gave us about three blocks from east to west, three blocks wide, and seven blocks long from north to south. This was our area, see.

Q: Those 10,000 people?

A: At that time there were a lot less, because when the Russians came in, some people that were wealthy moved to Russia. Some people volunteered to go to work in Russia. And when the war started with Germany, a lot of people ran away. So I would say maybe 6,000 Jews were in there.

Q: Did any members of your family leave, other than the aunt you described who went to Israel?

A: My aunt went to Israel in 1937, two years before the war started. It was hard to go to Israel. You had to join the Zionist organization and work two or three years before you could go. But my aunt married into a family that they had family in Israel, and for them it was easier. They sold everything and they went.

Q: At the outbreak of the war in '39 you were...

A: Seventeen years old.

Q: How did you receive the news of the outbreak of the war?

A: Well, in '39, the Polish government wasn't that crazy for the Jews and so it didn't really matter that time when the Russians took over. Some people it mattered more, because if they had some wealth, the Russians said, "bourgeois," and they took everything away. And they sent them to -- maybe it's not Siberia -- but to deep Russia someplace. But it didn't affect us because our family was more or less a working family.

Q: Had you started working?

A: Yes, I started working. I worked as an assistant manager. You see, the Russians have a system where everything is under the government. If you want to buy something, groceries or whatever it is, it's all government owned! And they had stores opened up and I was assistant manager in one of those stores where it was

in a military compound. It was called “Moientork”, which means for military personnel only. They could only buy things there. Civilians couldn’t even get in. And then, in 1941, they had what they call “maneuvers”. So I had to go with this military compound that went 200 miles away in the woods where they conducted their maneuvers, and I had to set up a store which I was running there by myself. I was, by that time, nineteen years old.

Q: That’s when the Germans came in?

A: We were supposed to stay there for six weeks and all of a sudden, everything left in a hurry. I heard that the Germans attacked and there is a war, so I just came back home.

Q: What was the reaction of the people around you in the community to the war? Were there meetings or some such thing?

A: No, people were just talking -- standing on the street and talking, and expecting rough times. But nobody expected the Holocaust.

Q: Does that mean that you had no information of how badly the Jews had been treated in Germany?

A: We heard about it, but from hearing to living it are two different things. We didn’t live through it, so we didn’t really realize how bad. At that time they weren’t killing anybody. Some Jewish businesses, they broke into or destroyed or broke windows or whatever, but we didn’t hear of anybody getting killed.

Q: At that point in ’41, was there any discussion about trying to get out?

A: I wanted to get out, but there was no place to go. My sister managed to leave into deep Russia, and she survived. When she heard the Germans were coming, she and a group of other girls just left for Russia.

Q: How old was she?

A: My sister was two years younger. I was nineteen, she was seventeen at the time. But she belonged to the Komsomol. The Komsomol was the youth organization of the Communist Party. So they actually encouraged them to leave.

Q: She was the only Communist in the house?

A: Yeah, she was the only one, but you can’t really call it a Communist. It was a youth group. Thanks to that she is alive.

Q: Do you know if your parents tried to discourage her from going to Russia?

- A: I don't think so. One of my cousins left too. He was not in the youth group. And he survived also.
- Q: How did life change, economically and socially, after the outbreak of the war? Was the first thing the move to the ghetto?
- A: Well, fortunately, we lived in that part of the town where the ghetto started, but in our house of four rooms, we had to take in one aunt and her family, and one uncle and his family. So there were three families in the house, four rooms. Each had a room.
- Q: And you obviously couldn't keep working for the Russian army, so what did you do?
- A: No, they left. (Sigh) The Germans had some work -- like I was cutting wood. In our part of the country, you used to heat the stove, with wood. So we had to saw it and cut it. I was working for the outfit that was called the Gendarmerie. The Gendarmerie. It's like the police. Nobody wanted to go there, so they sent me over there. I didn't have no choice. It turned out that the guy I worked for, a German, was a decent person and he used to give me some food. And then I took my cousin in there, to work with me.
- Q: Did your father continue to work?
- A: No, my father didn't continue to work.
- Q: So you were supporting your family?
- A: I was supporting my family, and they were selling everything, whatever they could, to get some food. There is a story behind this -- that my father didn't work. The Germans used to come up with different "shtiks." Like. "The ghetto is going to be divided. On this side of the ghetto, let's say, on the east side -- two blocks, three blocks -- are the people that don't work, and four blocks on the west side, the people that work are supposed to live there.' So my father didn't work, and we had to move out on the other side, and you couldn't find no place where to go. So I went to Otto, that guy I worked for, and I told him. "We have to move over on the other side and I haven't got no place where to move.' He said, "You know me. You know everybody around here. So don't worry. Just stay there.' He wouldn't come out and tell me that if you move on the other side, you won't live long.
- Q: You mean these people were deported?
- A: They surrounded it and they took them all out and they shot them! Behind the city, five or ten kilometers, they shot them.

- Q: And that was within just the beginning of the ghetto?
- A: Within three or four months.
- Q: Do you know how many people that was?
- A: Must have been about 3,000 people.
- Q: So you must have known immediately what they were up to.
- A: Oh, yes. Sure we knew it. There was nothing we could do about it. I did, but most of them didn't. At first we didn't know what happened there, but one fellow, he was on top of the pile. The bullet just went through his neck and they left him for dead, but he crawled out and came back to the ghetto, and he told the people what happened.
- Q: Well, forgive me for asking the question again, but -- what was the response?
- A: What can we do? They took all the leaders away, they took the rabbis away. The minute they made a ghetto. There was nobody left to organize or to do anything about it.
- Q: I know that you joined the underground. Can you tell me when was this?
- A: When I found out what was happening, I was still working, like I said, for the Gendarmerie, and we had a double garage. On one side of the garage we were sawing and cutting wood. On the other side of the garage we were collecting these weapons that the Russians threw away. And I told my cousin, "Let's get some of the weapons out of there." And he said, "How are you going to do it?" I said, "I'll get the key somehow." And I went in the office and put a pile of wood for the stove, and I reached for the key. I got out two rifles. One was a cut-off short one, one was a long rifle. I had a two-wheeler that they used to allow me to take the sawdust home so I took the two rifles and I put it in the bottom of that two wheeler. The long one was so long that it went all the way out that frame, so I took some rags and put it around there, and I filled it up with sawdust and I wheeled it all the way from work to the ghetto, all the way home. They looked at me, but everybody knew me because I worked for the Gendarmerie, so they didn't stop me.
- Q: This was in '41? A few months after the Germans came?
- A: It was about three, four months after that. And I had dug out a place. I hid them in there. But when I took them out, some people saw me.
- Q: Some other Jews?

A: Yeah. And when the word got around, people said, "We're organizing something." Got in touch with me if I want to join them. I said, "Sure." It's more to the story than just this. When I was cutting wood in there, there was one Ukrainian. They had Ukrainian helpers -- the Germans did. They were called Ukrainish Militia. That's like the police. And when I was cutting the wood, one of those guys came in with a rifle and he said to me, "You see this rifle? With this rifle I'm going to shoot the Germans." I was afraid that he wants to trap me and I moved away from him. I didn't want to talk to him. Somehow he did make contact with somebody else. He was the one that took my rifles and took them out of the ghetto to transport them to a certain area in the woods where we were supposed to meet. He used to come to the fence and we used to give it to him through the fence. He had a bicycle, and he used to take it on his bicycle. And one time the Germans were there and they grabbed him, his jacket. He just threw the jacket off and ran away. (Sigh) He knew already. I knew too, when it was going to happen, because a lot of those Ukrainish policemen came into town, and a lot of SS people came into town, two or three days before they were going to liquidate the ghetto. I just told my parents, "I'm going to leave." On the other side of town there was a factory making all kinds of meat products like sausages, and Jewish people used to work there. So we decided we'll take a group of people and have some of those Jewish policemen escort them through the town. I'm not sure whether it was the second of October or the third of October that we left the ghetto, and the fifth of October they liquidated the ghetto.

Q: Did you go with your cousin? Is that who the "we" is?

A: He didn't want to go. He had a girlfriend. He didn't want to leave his girlfriend, so he perished.

Q: So you went by yourself?

A: With another group of Jewish people I knew from the ghetto.

Q: Who all wanted to join the underground.

A: Yes.

Q: Were there men and women or all men?

A: Mostly young boys, 19, 20, a few of them older. There weren't any women.

Q: How did you make this plan?

A: Well, I didn't know about this plan, but since they knew about my rifles, they contacted me.

Q: So they had been organized. Were they Zionists? Were they Socialists?

- A: They were just people that were trying to stay alive. I couldn't put a label on any of them.
- Q: How many were you?
- A: Originally, a group of fifty people.
- Q: I'm not sure I understand how all of you got out through that sausage factory. Try to explain it to me again.
- A: Well, (sigh) when you used to go to work, they put you four in a row, all in a group -- a matching group. And two Jewish policemen guarded us like they were marching us to work. So we just marched through the ghetto and through the town like we are going to work in that factory, but we had to turn right to the factory, and we turned to the left.
- Q: And there were no German guards there.
- A: No. Because we was about five miles behind town already.
- Q: And those Jewish policemen also joined the underground?
- A: Oh yes, they joined us too.
- Q: So you got out, and then what?
- A: They told us that we're going to meet in the woods. The woods were divided in sections. And section fifteen we were supposed to meet. And he said over there I'm going to get my rifles back. But when we came into the woods, nobody knew where section fifteen was. Besides that, the leader who took us there to the woods -- we went to sleep at night, we got up in the morning -- he was gone!
- Q: The Jewish person from the ghetto had left?
- A: The Jewish person from the ghetto that took us out was gone! We didn't know what to do! And we didn't know how to get to section fifteen. So we decided we better go out and start asking! So we went out there, on the road, in the woods, and there's a wagon with a peasant and a boy, and we stopped them and we asked them for section fifteen. He described to us where it was. We told him we're hungry, and he said, "Okay. I'll show you where it is." He went away and he left us there, and after a couple of hours he came back with two buckets of soup and hard boiled eggs, and bread, but he said, "I've got to have some money." So whoever had some money, we paid him some money, and he kept it up for a couple of weeks like that -- he brought us this food in there. It was getting

towards winter and we started to think, what are we going to do? We've got to have a permanent shelter someplace.

Q: Had you made contact yet with anyone else?

A: No.

Q: So you were all just on your own.

A: Just a group of people without any leader, without any contact, without any weapons, without anything. So we started thinking about finding a permanent place where to stay the winter. And the group of fifty started dividing into smaller groups, because too big a group, too much attention. So six of us went our separate way and we went into an area where there was pines. And the pines are staying green all year around, so we started digging a shelter underneath, and we covered it with wood on top, and twigs, and put some sand. It was just like a hole in the ground, enough for six people to stay in there. In the meantime, we met up with some families too, that escaped from the ghetto.

Q: From your ghetto?

A: Yeah. There were families -- husband and wife and children. They were about two miles away from our place, and were going out into the villages and getting food, and they were cooking. Everybody knew that there are some Jews in that area, but they had to go out and get some food.

Q: They were little peasant towns?

A: Villages. Before we decided to get into smaller groups, we were a larger group -- like maybe twenty-five. We started to dig a winter shelter. Our camp was about two miles to where the pine trees were. We worked all morning, and while we were working, we heard some shots. There were two people that were left to guard the camp, whatever possessions we had, and when we came back, both of them were dead. So we decided we better move out of there altogether.

Q: You had no idea who shot them?

A: Yes, we knew who shot them. There was one informer, he was a local man. He was getting two pounds of sugar if he finds Jews in there. So he brought a group of Germans with him to show them where the Jews were, but lucky for us, there were only two in there, guarding. So we left that area altogether. We went to a village called Kaminagurah. Kaminagurah in English translation would be "Stone Mountain." And while I was in a house there, I was telling to the peasant man the story about my two rifles and this guy, Joska Schuher was his name, who took my rifles and disappeared. This peasant, Joga Larich, knew my father and my brother, because when times were tough, my father and my brother used to go in the

village and do some sewing, and they sewed some garments for this Joga Larich. When I told him who I was, he asked me, "Where's your brother Shlomo?" I said I didn't know. Well, when I mentioned Joska Schuher, that I gave him the rifles, he called -- I was in one room -- "Joska Schuher, come here!" And Joska Schuher was with him! In the house there! He came in. and Larich said, "show me your rifle!" He was carrying my sawed-off shotgun. I said, "Yeah, this is my shotgun." Larich said, "Give him the shotgun right away." So he gave me the shotgun and he gave me some bullets with it. And I said, "I've got one more that you've got." He told him, "You'd better give it to him -- the other one. It's his! Give it to him!" They were fighting the Germans. They were this group -- three brothers and two Jewish guys from the ghetto joined them, and they had two paratroopers from the Russian underground -- and they were hit-and-run with the Germans from one end of the town to the other end, and the Germans couldn't catch them. So this group helped me get my rifles back. So I left for that area where I was supposed to collect my other rifle.

Q: Alone?

A: No, with the other people that I was with. I got there and Joska Schuher said, "I don't have a rifle. What do you need two rifles for? I'm going to keep your rifle." And I said, "Okay, keep my rifle." So we stayed in the woods, and they had a group of people in there, and there was a family man with his wife in there, and he knew the area very, very well. He was a forester. So we stayed with them until the Ukrainians surrounded us and they started shooting at us. So we start shooting back, and we got out of there. Then we split.

Q: Can you tell me roughly, is it in the winter-time?

A: Yeah, it's the winter time of '42, December, around there. Because 1941, in June, the war started. We were in the ghetto one winter, because I remember we didn't have no wood for heating the house. I had to go out and break some fences to bring some wood home. So it was '42.

Q: You said they liquidated the ghetto in October.

A: October '42, not '41. I think there's a reference to our ghetto, when they liquidated it, in the book The Third Reich. One German engineer testified at the Nuremberg trials. He was in Dubno working on some engineering project when he heard machine gun shooting and he went to investigate and that's what he saw. He described it, and it's written in the book. It was October 5, 1942, when that happened.

Q: So you're now talking about December, '42 or the early winter in '43?

A: Yes. So after they surrounded us and started shooting at us, we split again -- in smaller groups. We got out of there and we went to a different area. In our

group, like I said before, there were only six of us. Pully Shuk was one's name. Another one was named Chaim Riklis, and one I can't recall his name, and one was a Russian engineer, a Jew from Russia, and one was from central Poland, and he escaped in '39 to our area. So there were six of us. And the shelter that I described that we were building for the winter-time, one morning we woke up, and somebody was walking on top of our shelter, and it was a Jewish guy from the other camp. He called us and he said we should come out. "There are partisans here." Chaim Riklis -- he was my friend -- he grabbed my shotgun and said, "I'm not going out there until I investigate a little more." "Leave the shotgun here." And three of them went out and as they went out, I heard shots. They shot 'em! So I started shooting back. I think I saw one was wounded in the leg. They started jumping on that roof that we made to cave it in, but it didn't give. I started shooting a few more shots and all of a sudden it's quiet. We went out and they were gone. Chaim Riklis, my friend, was wounded, and two of them were dead.

Q: Of those six?

A: Yeah Two of them died right there, so we buried them. We didn't bury them right away. We got out of there and started running but we came back the next day and we buried those two. In the meantime -- Chaim Riklis -- another group took him with them, but he died later on because there was no medicine. There was nothing to heal his wounds.

Q: Who was it, who was outside your shelter, who killed you?

A: Ukrainians.

Q: Ukrainians working for the Germans?

A: They were working on their own! They were just trying to salvage whatever they could from whatever we had. Some of our people came out with some money, gold pieces, or whatever.

Q: How were you living? How were you eating?

A: Well, we used to go out to the closest village and try to buy some food. Or else we used to go out in the fields, when the fields had some potatoes or kraut -- cabbage -- and take it from the fields. And carrots. Whatever we could get.

Q: Did you leave the ghetto with some money?

A: I personally had very little money, but some of the people had some gold pieces. Like that fellow that got killed from that shelter had some gold pieces with him, and we used to trade in the gold pieces to buy some food with it. But after this incident, I told the rest of the guys, "I'm not going to sit and wait till they come

and get me.” At that time, the Polish population in the villages, the Ukrainians gave them trouble too. They wanted to chase them out of there. Off that land, because the area was Ukrainian. So we guarded the Polish settlers in these villages, and we used to stay in houses, and we used to get food for guarding the villages! When they started coming shooting at them, we start shooting back. And word got around. When the Russian partisans came in there, they heard there’s a Jewish group in here that has weapons. So they sent somebody to see if we want to join up. And nobody wanted to join up except myself and that Joska Schuher -- that fellow that took my two rifles and then I got them back from him. So the two of us joined up with the partisan group.

Q: Why didn’t your Jewish friends want to join?

A: They were comfortable already. They were living in the peasant house where they had shelter and they had food. They didn’t feel like they want to go and join up with the partisans.

Q: And why did you want to join up?

A: Mainly for taking revenge for what happened to our people. And I figured if I’m going to be with a big group like that, I’ll be able to do it!

Q: So how did you join up with them? How did you find them?

A: They sent word that they are in this village, which was about fifteen kilometers from where I stayed. I went there, in the area where they were staying. I went by myself. They asked me, “How many of you?” And I told them that so many people fought. And they said, “Do you want to join up?” I said, “I’d like to join up, but I don’t know about the other ones. I’ll have to go back and ask them.” So they said, “Okay, you go back and ask them.”

Q: What languages were you speaking to one another?

A: Russian.

Q: Did you know Russian that well?

A: Well when the Russians came in to that area where I lived, from ’39 to ’41, in two years, I learned Russian. Not perfect Russian, but I learned enough that I was managing one of these stores in there. So I spoke to them in Russian. And when I got back, only Joska Schuher said, “Okay, I’ll join.” So the next morning, when we went to that area where they’re supposed to be, they were gone, but they left word with one local Polish resident where they were going to be, where we can find them. And he was joining up. So we went through woods, and the Germans caught up with us, we got out of fighting with the Germans, and Ukrainians caught up. In one area we saw Germans and we start shooting at each other, and

it turned out these were partisans dressed in German uniforms, and this fellow, recognizing a Polish guy, said, "No, these are partisans. They're just dressed like Germans.." So we quit shooting, and they showed us where they were, and we joined up at that time.

Q: How long did it take you to get to them?

A: I would say about three days before we caught up with them.

Q: When you said that you met up with Germans and Ukrainians, tell me what...

A: Well, the Ukrainians were looking for Jews in the woods. In fact there was one Jewish guy killed. He was a pharmacist. He was going to join up too, but he got killed. But this was not with my group.

Q: And you found the partisans.

A: We found the partisans and I joined in with a group of ten. We used to go out and do some underground work, like blowing up bridges and blowing up railroad tracks and things like that.

Q: Do you know much about that whole partisan organization? Your ten were part of a larger organization?

A: Yes. When I joined up with them, there were about 200 people. And the name of the partisan group was called Soyadinninya Oducha. It was named after the person who organized it. By the time I left it, there were about 2,000 people. I was with the general staff at that time, and they had different groups.

Q: What was the general staff?

A: The general staff was the people that gave orders to the rest of them, what operations that you do. I was reconnaissance. I was with them from, January, '43, until March or April of 1944. It's about fourteen months.

Q: That whole time, were you living in the forest, or did you have a place in a village?

A: Part of the time we had camps in the forest. But the Ukrainians -- they were Ukrainian nationalists -- they surrounded us in order to chase us out of there, or to destroy us, because they were against the Russians too. They wanted a homeland of their own. And we knew they were going to surround us, but the general staff wanted to test the fighting of the people to see how they were for fighting against. So we had a good fight in there. We fought for two days. We had to leave everything and we got out of there just whatever we were able to take with us. We left all our wagons and supplies and everything, because there were so many

of them. There was one friend of mine in that fight that perished. Sossick. He was from my wife's town -- from Poland. When I got to the partisans, he was there already, a Jew. There were very few Jews in the partisans. The Jews they wouldn't take in unless they had their own weapons. All the other nationals, they could come in without any weapons, but a Jew they wouldn't take in if he wouldn't have the weapons.

Q: Why was that?

A: Discrimination. Call it whatever.

Q: It was anti-Semitism.

A: Anti-Semitism! The Russians killed some Jews, supposedly for violating some rules. I almost got it, too!

Q: How is that?

A: Well the first encounter was they gave me horses to take care of. I didn't know anything about horses. So when we camped, I was supposed to put on the front feet some ropes so the horses wouldn't be able to go away to escape. I didn't know nothing about it! I just put them in the pasture, and then when we were supposed to start up again. I was looking for my horses and my horses were gone. So they took me in and the general staff started asking me all these questions. How come I didn't take care of the horses. I told them I didn't know anything about horses! Nobody told me what to do with the horses. There was one fellow, when I was managing the store over there, he knew me from coming in in the store, and he told them, "What do you expect of him? He's a businessman, he's a clerk! He worked in a store! What does he know about horses?" And that saved me right there. But they did kill some Jews! Like for instance, two of them were standing guard duty -- one Jewish fellow and another one -- so the other one came back and told them the Jewish fellow was sleeping on duty. So they killed him for that, shot him. Just for what the other guy said! There was another young fellow, we were close to a village where his mother was hiding at a peasant house, and he wanted to see his mother, so they let him go. And the Ukrainians took his rifle away from him. He came back without the rifle. So what they did to him, they asked him where did it happen, and he went and showed them where it happened, and it was in a barn. They told him to go in the barn. They locked him up, and they burned the barn! And another Jewish fellow, a Russian Jewish guy, didn't want to admit that he was Jewish. He probably knew how big the anti-Semitism was. So he said he was a Ukrainian. What they did to him is, they had a record player, and they played a Jewish tune on the record player, and he was humming the Jewish tune. They watched him humming the Jewish tune, and then they accused him that he was a German spy, and they took him out and shot him.

- Q: Even though he was willing to fight? And that you understand was just anti-Semitism?
- A: Pure anti-Semitism! Just pure anti-Semitism.
- Q: But you described your rising in the ranks.
- A: Because I was not afraid! Anything -- blowing up trains, or doing that kind of work -- they knew they could depend on me. They called me, in Russian, "Fearless Reconnaissance Man," or something like that. I didn't care. I was in there to kill as many as I could. Just to take revenge.
- Q: If I can ask a hard question, is that how you understand your fearlessness?
- A: At that time, yes, I was fearless. I didn't care if I get shot or if I get killed. I just wanted to kill as many as I could. That's all I wanted to do. And every time we went out on an operation they were raving, "Mishka! Mishka!" they used to call me Mishka -- my name there. They made me commander of a group, because of that.
- Q: Can you tell me, if you want to, about some of the operations you organized when you were a commander?
- A: Well, we were close to where the trains were going to the front with German ammunition and weapons and everything, so we went out there and put some dynamite under the tracks and we had to pull a string to ignite it. We hid about 200 feet behind the tracks, and nobody wanted that job, to pull it. I was there pulling that string and then escaping after the explosion.
- Q: Sometimes it backfired?
- A: Right.
- Q: But you pulled it.
- A: I pulled it. And then when they wanted to find out if the Germans are in certain areas, they sent me out there for reconnaissance. And I used to go out so close, they knew I was fearless. And so they gave me assignments like that all the time.
- Q: You had all Russians with you?
- A: Yeah. All my people were Russians. In fact, some of the people were career officers! But they were under me! It's a story to it. They joined up with the Germans to fight against their own people -- against the Russians -- these people. There was an officers school. They were training them for officers (Russian officers) in General Vlasov's army! This German, he was a Communist, he came,

and he told us about it. It was about 50 kilometers from where our camp was, so we decided to make contact with some of them and see if they were willing to join up with us. But you could only get one or two people on it, because if somebody found out that wasn't in favor of it, you were done. This German we had encountered, he said, "We'll just tell them we're going on maneuvers. And you just bring your men here." That's what he did. He woke them up early in the morning. "We're going out on maneuvers." It was a group of about fifty of them and they brought them all in. And they started questioning some of them. The leaders were against the Russian system, so they killed some of the leaders there, but the rest of them stayed with us. So this is how I got some officers working under my command.

Q: Where did you acquire your supplies from? You talked about horses, wagons...

A: Well we used to go out and just raid! Just raid villages, especially those that were unfriendly to us.

Q: Was there any contact from Russia to the partisans?

A: Yes. We had an airfield! At night we used to make fires on four corners of the airfield and planes used to come down and bring us automatic weapons, explosives, and stuff like that.

Q: Did you have radios?

A: Yes. Personally, I didn't have no radio, but the general staff was in contact with Moscow.

Q: You knew what the allies were doing?

A: Yes.

Q: You knew when the war was coming to an end?

A: Yes.

Q: So tell me how the war ended for you.

A: We had instructions to go behind the lines in Poland when the Germans were pulling back, and we went to a river. The Germans gave us a good licking over there! Some of them crossed -- I have a brother-in-law that crossed there -- but I couldn't make it across. There were just remnants of us. So we went back to report what happened, and they dismissed us. That was April, 1944.

Q: What does that mean that they dismissed you? In a forest?

- A: No, no, no! I went back to town! Where I lived!
- Q: You went back home?
- A: Yes! I went back home.
- Q: In all of this, how far did you get from your little town?
- A: Well, I would say we went as far as Zhitomer from Dubno, about 800 miles or a thousand miles. Something like that.
- Q: On foot?
- A: Well later on, when I was in the reconnaissance, I had a horse.
- Q: But you went back home by foot?
- A: We just hitch-hiked.
- Q: And who was picking you up?
- A: Anybody that was driving a truck or something.
- Q: Were they Russians? Or Jews?
- A: Mostly the military, Russian soldiers. In fact -- this is another good story -- they gave me an assignment before they let me go. We had to take the horses back to Zhitomer. I was driving a number of horses, I don't know how many of them...
- Q: Why did they want you to take them back?
- A: Well, there's a Polish Ukraine and there's a Russian Ukraine. The horses came from the Polish Ukraine and they wanted to take them to the Russian Ukraine to give them to the collective farms there, because in this part of the Ukraine there weren't any collective farms. There were individual owners. While I was driving these horses, a truck passed by and a group of Jewish people from my town recognized me. I thought I was the only one left, but I saw a group of people waving to me. They didn't stop. They just waved, and went on their way.
- Q: But you didn't abandon the horses!
- A: I couldn't!
- Q: I take it that you didn't become a Communist.
- A: Oh, no!

- Q: Even though you worked so long with them and were willing to take the horses back to a commune.
- A: Well, that's something I had to do! But I never became a Communist!
- Q: So you dropped the horses off and went back.
- A: Came back to Rovno. Rovno was about 60 miles from my town. I reported to where I was supposed to report, and the partisans were broken up.
- Q: So who did you report to?
- A: The government in there! Whoever was in charge of the government. He told me, "Okay, you can go back home now."
- Q: And who was left?
- A: A few people. I found out from one of the survivors in there that my father lived. About two, three months after the liquidation. He was hiding out in a shelter with some of the people that survived. And he went to the villages -- to the peasants that he used to know, used to work for -- and he thought maybe he'd make it through there, but he never made it.
- Q: You imagine he was killed there.
- A: Oh, yes! Not the Germans -- the Ukrainians. The Germans had plenty of helpers! The Germans you could fool. The Germans didn't know whether you were a Jew or a gentile or what. But the local Ukrainians -- you couldn't fool them. They would point out, "This is a Jew! This is a Jew!" -- even if you had papers says a gentile! Couldn't fool them.
- Q: Do you know what happened to the rest of the members of your family?
- A: They got killed. Like I said, I read it myself in The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. I told you about it. I imagine that's how they got killed. My mother, and three brothers, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, cousins.
- Q: Some of your grandparents?
- A: One grandparent that lived not in our ghetto but thirty, forty kilometers from us in a little town -- he perished there, and another son -- my uncle -- and his three daughters. The whole family! There's nobody left. The only one that's left is my sister.
- Q: Where is she?

- A: She is in Israel. She lives in Rehovot. She's the only one left.
- Q: Do you know how your father got out? Did anyone explain that?
- A: Well, I built a hiding place before I decided to run away. I built a hiding place at our house and he probably stayed in that hiding place. And after a while, he joined up with the other people that had secret hiding places.
- Q: There was no deportation?
- A: No. They killed them at the airport. They just dug big (sigh) holes, caves -- whatever you want to call them. We knew about the digging, too, because the word got to us before it even started, but as they told us, that's going to be for keeping potatoes for the winter (laughs) So, I know exactly where it happened. And then when I read the book it described exactly what they did. They told them to undress. And they killed them one on top of the other. That's what they did.
- Q: So what happened to you then -- after you were in your town? There were still a few people, you said.
- A: Yes. Our house, for some reason, was demolished -- was rubbish. But across the street there was a gentile, Polish neighbor. When the ghetto was there, they moved out to a different place, but after the ghetto was liquidated, they moved back to their house. So I stayed with them for a while. I met my wife in the partisans too. I have to go back, where she was.
- Q: Oh, tell me about that.
- A: I don't remember what was the name of the outfit, but she belonged to our general staff. We were in a town named Kubichev, and some of my people told me, "There is a Jewish girl there." So I went to see her, and that's the first time I met her. She was released, and she's going back to look for her sister and her brother-in-law.
- Q: She was release by?
- A: By the partisans, already. There was that church where it was liberated, already, so they released this partisan -- her. My brother-in-law and her sister -- they were in the same outfit that I was. I knew her sister because when we were surrounded by the Ukrainians, she came and gave me some water to drink. But I never knew my wife. So when I met her, she told me where she was going to look for her sister. My brother-in-law, like I said, we split -- he wasn't my brother-in-law yet - - he was on one side of that river they managed to go across, and I was on this side. So it took him a long time before he got out of there. Anyway, she told me she is going to Ostruk. When she came to Ostruk, I don't know whether she

found her sister, but there were some Jewish people, and the Jewish people kept her until she got united with her sister and with her brother-in-law. Then they moved to another little town, Stubenhoff. I was there in Stubenhoff, also, and I started taking her out on dates. And then when there was the repatriation back to Poland and Stubenhoff was under the Russians, and they left for Lodz, Poland so they got their papers and went back. I was also a Polish national -- even though I lived there in that area that the Russians annexed, I wasn't born under the Russians -- so I got my papers and I went also to Lodz. And I looked up my wife; at that time, she wasn't my wife, yet. From there I went to Gliwice. That's another town that Poland annexed, it used to be German. And I lived there for a while. I did some bartering with suits, and I used to come from there to Lodz, and, I asked her, after courting her, if she would like to marry me. And we got married, on July 12, 1945, and we lived in Gliwice. We opened up a store. It's kind of a butcher store. You could buy all kinds of meat products. In December '45 we decided to go to the West. We will get out of Poland altogether. So we left Gliwice and we came to Berlin. We stayed in Berlin -- January, February -- in March, I think, we left Berlin and went to the American zone. Eschwingen, Germany. There was a D.P. camp.

Q: Had you considered going to Israel?

A: Yes.

Q: And how did you make your choice?

A: Well, my sister was in Israel already, and my aunt was in Israel, but my brother-in-law had a brother here, in Minneapolis. And in 1947, he emigrated here to Minneapolis. So my wife didn't want to split with her sister. She had only one and only a sister, and she said, no, she'd like to go to the United States. So I gave up my plans and we came to the United States.

Q: In what year?

A: In 1949.

Q: So how long were you in the D.P. camp in Germany?

A: From '46 to '49. Three years.

Q: I didn't realize people stayed that long. What was your life like in the D.P. camp?

A: Well, I was taking up auto mechanics. And I guess I was good in theoretical auto mechanics. After I graduated, they offered me a job as an instructor. We got a ration. I worked for the UNRRA, the United Nations relief organization, and I had a higher ration than everybody else had, because I worked there. And then I got some pay, too, so we had one room and we shared a bathroom. We had a

kitchen set up, a little electric stove, and we cooked in the bathroom. Somebody had to go to the bathroom, you had to leave your cooking. So for three years, we lived like that.

Q: Were you waiting to be admitted to the United States?

A: We were waiting to go someplace. They wouldn't let us go to Israel at the beginning.

Q: They would not?

A: No. The only way we could go to Israel is to go illegally. That's the only way we could go. So we had to sit there and wait.

Q: Were you aided by any agencies to get to the United States?

A: Yes. HIAS was involved and there's another agency in the United States that takes care of overseas. The Joint Distribution.

Q: Do you consider yourself a part of the Jewish community here?

A: Yes. I'm a member of the J.C.C. I'm a member of 'B'nai Emet Synagogue. I don't take any active part, but I am a member of the Jewish community! Send my kids to Hebrew school.

Q: How many children do you have?

A: Two. The daughter you met, and I've got a son which hasn't found himself yet.

Q: They were born here?

A: Son was born in Germany.

Q: In the D.P. camp? In what year?

A: In 1947.

Q: And your daughter?

A: Daughter was born here in 1956.

Q: Do you keep in active contact with other survivors of the war?

A: Not as much now as we used to in the beginning. In the beginning we had a club and we used to meet, we used to be in contact in Minneapolis. After our daughter

got married and you have grandchildren, you kind of take what's closer to your heart, you know, and so that club doesn't exist any more.

Q: Have you been in contact with any partisans in the United States?

A: I haven't been in contact with any partisans. No.

Q: Now I want to ask you a number of questions that they would like to have your personal responses to, that are a lot more abstract. The first question is: What it means to you to be a survivor?

A: Yeah, it makes sense to me. What it means to be a survivor is to show the world if you have guts and if you have nerve you can survive the Holocaust! And to show that not all the Jewish people went to death like sheep. Some of us didn't accept it, and we were fighting!

Q: After the Holocaust, as a result of it, do you have feelings about "human nature," about "Germans," about "non-Jews?" Do you have any response to those questions?

A: Feelings about human nature? (sighs) Humans can be swayed by their leaders! By demagoguery! By false accusations, anti-Semitism, they can become wild animals. It depends on the leaders. Basically human beings, if they have a nice, decent leadership, they're human beings! But they can become animals if they have demagoguery.

Q: Do you continue to have feelings about the Germans?

A: Well not all the Germans were that bad. I had one that I worked for that used to bring me in a loaf of bread behind his uniform and told me to hide it. And I forgot to mention a very important incident that happened in the ghetto before the liquidation of the ghetto. There was one German-Austrian on a motorcycle -- he wasn't supposed to come in the ghetto -- he was driving in the streets of the ghetto and hollering, "Jews, get out! This is going to be the end of you! Jews get out!" He took a risk, and he came and warned the Jews! Not all of them were Nazis or murderers. There were some decent people, but they were helpless to do anything. And they were afraid for their own? (word missing in original translation) If they got involved, they might bury themselves! But some of them were doing it willingly! If the Germans would have different leadership, wouldn't be a Hitler, I don't think anything like that would happen.

Q: One of the things you told me is that you've become a secularist. You described yourself as having grown up in a religious family. Is your choice to become a secularist tied up with your experiences in the Holocaust?

- A: (Sigh) In the house we still keep kosher, my wife buys kosher meat. But if you go out, you can't find a kosher meal here any place, so by necessity, if you can't eat anything kosher, you eat un-kosher. So, in that sense, I'm secular. Half secular.
- Q: But has the Holocaust affected your feelings about religion?
- A: (Sigh) It's a question in my mind. Why the Jewish people are never taught to fight back! To be aggressive! Well, in Israel, it's changed now. But, when I was born, there was always, "turn the other cheek," a gun was something that's not for Jews, and things like that. I would like to see a Jewish people know everything about guns, know everything about fighting, and everything about war. When times like what happened before, they would know how to act, what to do, how to organize. We were helpless, we didn't have no organization. Even so, we managed to get out somehow, but we could have had a resistance in there -- "As long as we have to go, the whole town might as well go with us!" -- and keep real good resistance like the Warsaw ghetto. But it wasn't in our nature. There was nobody to inspire us! There was nobody to organize. There was nobody to do anything about it.
- Q: Well, Mr. Grosblat, you were very different than that. You did fight! Can you tell me why you think you were different?
- A: I remember an incident in school, when I was a kid. Here you have separate desks. Where I went to school, two of us were sitting together. And I was sitting with one Nicolaichuk -- I still remember his name -- and he was always kicking me, and he was always pushing me! And I just hit him! In class! When the teacher called us out, I told the teacher what happened and she still blamed me. She put me in the corner and I had to stand in the corner. So I had a feeling, as a kid, that I gotta fight for my well-being. I gotta fight for my rights. I gotta fight for what nobody else will. I was just a rebel!
- Q: The last question I wanted to ask you is if you've seen films about, or read many books about, the Holocaust, do you think that they accurately depict what happened?
- A: No. They left a lot of it out. There were times where they used to take babies and throw them against walls -- babies -- I don't think I ran into any of that in the reading.
- Q: Well those are my questions. Is there anything you want to add? Or say for the record?
- A: What I'd like to add is, Jews should be more organized. They should be expert and should know weaponry. They should know their enemies. They should stand up -- should be able to fight whenever something like this happens. Not to take it lying down and be helpless and resigned to whatever is going to happen, to do

nothing about it. Just take a knife or axe or anything, if they come after you. Try to get them first. The youth should grow up tough. You might not have to be tough, but you should grow up tough, and you should fight for what you believe in. You're a human being just like anybody else. You happen to be born Jewish, and for centuries when all the anti-Semitism was going on it poisoned a lot of minds and even in this country, we're still experiencing anti-Semitism, so everybody should be able to take care of himself.