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Summary

Meyer Vesterman was born in Latvia, Riga, on September 18, 1925, to a Jewish family. His was a large family and well established in Courland. They immigrated in the 16th century from Spain to Holland, from Germany to Poland, and after the fall of Livonia to the newly created Duchy Courland and settled in the eastern part of the dukedom. There are only a few relatives still alive today. Most members of the Vesterman's family were murdered during the Holocaust. Just four relatives managed to survive in German-occupied Latvia: his cousin, Aron, who was hiding with 13 other Jews in a basement; a distant relative, Schlomer, who was active in the resistance, and Julius, also a distant relative, with whom he spent time in the camp. Vesterman fled on July 27, 1944, while on the march from the concentration camp Dondangen. He found refuge in a Latvian farmer's home. The farmers helped him exchange his prison garb for civilian clothes. He then went to the camp in north Courland, Operwald (?), where he had met Latvian Baptists. These Baptists were able to save many camp inmates from starvation by leaving bread pieces, boiled potatoes, etc. along the path for the prisoners to find. He joined some partisans, and together they hid in the forest. All but Vesterman were killed on December 25, 1944, by the Germans.

Vesterman's father was an industrialist. He owned several houses and commercial spaces. Although the Soviets assigned him to be the director of his nationalized companies, he knew that the family was also on the list to be deported. Once the last battles on the river Dvina faded away on June 29, 1941, Vesterman and his parents and older brother Arnold, born in 1921 in Riga and a professional pianist, decided to flee by bicycle. The trains were not operating anymore. When they arrived in Sigulda, by the border, they were shot at, and the family decided to go back to Riga. On the 10th day of the German occupation of Riga, his brother was arrested and taken to the central prison, where he was executed on October 15, 1942. One day after, Vesterman was also taken to the central penitentiary and placed in the youth wing. He and other inmates were ordered by Latvian police to dig out trenches to bury hundreds of dead Soviet soldiers who were lying on the roadside on the outskirts of Riga. In August of 1942, Latvian auxiliaries took Vesterman to the house that his parents and sister were. It was a tenant house, and many other Latvians were living in it also. His father was ordered to be the dvornik (janitor) and to sweep the horse manure in front of his own house. For him, to be seen doing dirty work was supposed to be a mockery of a wealthy Jew. In early October, the Vesterman family was ordered by the SS to move into the Ghetto in the Luzern street 76. Considering that there were 30,000 Ghetto residents, it was challenging to find a place to stay. On October 28, Vesterman was transferred to the labor camp at the so-called small Ghetto. There were 4,500 people. Those residents who stayed behind were executed at gunpoint on November 30. To get an opportunity to visit the "large Ghetto" and to see whether the one or the other family member is still alive, one could volunteer to work the bodies-collection-unit. Most of the Ghetto and the entire Luzern street was covered with dead Ghetto residents. According to records, there were 800 victims beaten to death, and children were thrown out the windows onto the street. They transported the dead bodies on carts and sleds to a nearby Jewish burial

site and placed them into mass graves. On December 8, Vesterman's family was supposed to be relocated to a different camp; this is what everyone believed.

A nurse from Switzerland handed out letters of former "relocated" Jewish Latvians. These letters were meant to prove the truthfulness of the relocation action. In reality, though, these were bogus letters used to appease the victims. Vesterman and some others embraced any opportunity to flee and to resist. He became part of the resistance movement, and, because of his young age, he was assigned to smuggle weapons into the Ghetto. There were about six boys aged 15 and 16 participating. They met at the end of the day in a partly demolished potato cellar and making escape plans. They were not able to escape, and, in 1944, he was sent to a subcamp of Kaiserwald, north of Latvia. Gustav Sorge was the commandant of the camp and known for beating the inmates to death. When the camp was liquidated, the surviving prisoners were marched to Libau. After three days of marching, Vesterman escaped into the forest and joined a different resistance group and hid in the woods until Germany's surrender. Vesterman enlisted in a combat unit and continued fighting against Nazism during the last stretches of the war.

Translated & Summarized by Maria F. Baker