

I'm interviewing Majlech Kisielnicki--

Majleck Kisielnicki.

--on July--

Kisielnicki, Michael--

--or Michael Kishel--

--Kishel.

--on July 1, 1990.

My name is Michael Kishel. I was born Kisielnicki. At my bris, I was giving the name of Majleck. I lived in Kaluszyn, Poland, which is 56 kilometers east of Warsaw on the way to Brest-Litovsk and beyond.

The first years of-- when I was a young boy, I was attending cheder. And later, I was attending Betasefer, which was a Hebrew school only, to learn Hebrew, and the public school till the seventh grade. My family consisted of parents, my father Moishe, my mother Reizel, my brother Abram, and my sister Heisura. We had lived very well.

And we had-- in the late 1920s, early '30s, my father had a business of retail and wholesale groceries. In the early '30s, my father got to make a gasoline station, as the road-- as this town that we lived in was a main road from Warsaw to the east, which was very heavy in traffic. And [INAUDIBLE] very good things.

He also made a restaurant that was open 24 hours a day, and practically 365 days a year. Of course, we only had closed on major holidays. Saturdays, we closed the front, but business was done in the back.

We also had a business in wholesale kosher products such as petroleum, nafta, coal, rice, sugar, salt, and many products that had to be brought in from Warsaw to sell to the local grocery stores. We were very well-off in many ways.

What was [INAUDIBLE] your father's [INAUDIBLE]?

My father was born also in Kaluszyn. I believe he was in 1895. And my mother was born in 1900, also in Kaluszyn. They were young people when they got married. Thinking-- my mother would have been 17 or 18 years old, as you can see on the picture.

Could you tell me a little bit about your-- both of your parents' family? Your father had a lot of siblings?

My father had-- my father's family consisted of-- there were two brothers and two sisters.

And where was he?

One sister emigrated to Argentina in the '20s. And another sister emigrated to France, also in the '20s. And he also had a brother, who also lived in Poland. And my father's brother had-- the family consisted of him and his wife. And they had nine children. And they all perished.

My mother had-- there were four sisters and two brothers. One sister lives now in Israel. She's the only one that remained. One sister died in Russia after she ran away from the Germans in 1939. And one sister and my mother died in the Holocaust in September 1939 when-- September 1942 when they were taken to Treblinka.

What did your father's father do? Was he also a businessman, a grocer, or--

I don't remember what my father's father did, because he died in the '20s. And I don't recall exactly what he was doing. I believe he was dealing in produce they brought in from Kaluszyn to Warsaw during market days. And from there, he brought back merchandise for stores that ordered certain merchandise.

I see. So he was wholesaler.

Some kind. He would be called a supplier of things, whatever, that someone needed. My mother's father, I was told, they used to work for someone that lived in the forest, like the princess or very rich gentiles. And they used to sell their woods. And he used to be, I suppose, their accountant, or something like that in that respect. My grandfather died in the early '30s.

Did your-- what kind of education did your parents have?

My mother had an education. She was attending, during the First World War, the Russian schools-- and, of course, Jewish education. My father only had a Jewish education.

Do you know what age he was when he left school?

No. This, I don't know. I do not know when my father left school, or my mother. But I do know that they could go along with knowledge and on many, many different things.

What languages did you speak in your household?

In the household, we spoke mainly Yiddish. Occasionally, when there are people that came from-- gentiles that came to visit us, we spoke Polish.

Did your parents ever discuss the circumstances of their meeting?

I believe my parents did not discuss with us the circumstances of their meeting. But we know that my mother wanted to marry my father because he was very industrious, although the family of my mother's was more prominent than my father's.

But you think they just met through friends?

Oh, no. No, they did not meet through friends. But they were about the same age, although it was different about five years. But when it comes to marry, this is the ages that you marry, between four to six, seven years apart.

OK. And did you always live in the same house as a child?

As a child, I remember, until the 1929 or '30, we lived in an apartment, which was a one-bedroom apartment. And we were three children, which was a little too high, too tight in today's standards. But in those years, the more the merrier. There was no such thing as there is no space, you cannot sleep, or sleep there.

Right.

There's no such thing. And if somebody came to visit, there was always a place to find for them. And later on, when we had the business in the late '20s, we had rented-- it was a house that my father rented at the beginning, which later on we bought. It was on a lot that we consider here 75 feet by 200 feet in the length-- or not to say 75, maybe 60 feet wide, and about 200 feet long. And there was that house that we lived in.

And the house had a store. In the back of the store, we had the living quarters. We also had an attic, which a tenant lived there before. And then, because we needed the apartment, we paid him to move out. And we occupied that apartment also.

Because of the space that we needed more, my family rented an apartment that we used only for a bedroom about two houses away, which was only about 10 steps away. The back of the lot or warehouse-- of course, all the things that was necessary for the business. And sometimes, there was a lot of space that we used to plant fruits, or onions, or potatoes, or strawberries, or whatever my mother or the people that worked for us liked to do, because we always had people helping us out in many, many ways.

Non-Jewish people?

That's right. I don't want to mention it over there.

Yeah. That sounds nice. So you remember growing up in this environment?

Yes.

What kind of a street and neighborhood was it?

Well, the neighborhood-- our town was a town of a population of about 10,000. And we had about 75%, 80% Jewish. Maybe not exactly 75%, but it was about a 65% Jewish. And that, I remember from many, many years.

The town lived mainly from different trades. There were a lot of people that had a trade making prayer shawls, tallisem. There were also a lot of people that made sheepskin coats. There were a few people that dealt in skin, making leather, tannery. And of course, shoemakers and tailors were abundant.

And the majority of it, the rest were mostly, I would say, about 30% of the people that did have businesses, businesses of textile, like selling materials for suits. There was no such thing as ready-made suits here. There were tailors that made ready-made suits. But they were making them for out-of-town, maybe for business people in Warsaw or other ones. But if you wanted to have a suit, you went to the store to buy 3 yards or 3 meters of material, and give it to a tailor, who made it for you.

I remember that we always had two suits a year, for Passover and for high holidays. After that year, the following year, my mother gave the suits away to relatives who were less fortunate. And if they were still good in the same condition, they wore it that way. If not, they turned it over on the other side, the material, and remade it. It would look like new. The same thing was with shoes and other things.

How would you describe the relations between the Jewish families and the non-Jewish? Were they Catholics?

The gentiles in our town were 99% Catholics. The relations between the gentiles and the Jews officially were supposedly good. We, in particular, had no problem, because all the gentiles that used to come around had respect for my father.

And especially the precinct, the police, were practically stationed in our house, because it was a station that the trucks and buses that used to pass by our town made a stopover. They can gas, fill in with gas. And all the passengers came into our restaurants to eat. And for this, it was very lively in our area.

And the town was-- every evening, young people used to stroll along the streets, especially the main street, which it was called Warsaw Street, or Warszawska. And especially when it came Friday night and Saturday night, you could not pass the certain area without bumping into one another, because they were walking four or five in a width, and all friends and young people. And everybody was very happy.

Of course, there occasionally were anti-Semitic slogans not to buy from Jews, because-- this came from other places that instigated against Jews. And of course, it dropped off among other populations, other areas. And the same thing rubbed off on Jews in our area.

So there were local fascists, youths?

Yes. There were fascists. But officially, they did not come up to say exactly what they are. But in a group, they were barking.

But many times, the gentiles had very much respect for my family, for my father. And there was no hesitation that if someone came into our house and said something against the Jews, that my father could take his neck and throw him out with a kick in the back, in the rear end. And it was OK.

And as the decade, the '30s progressed, did things get tougher?

Well, it start to get a little tougher after Hitler came to power. And there was a lot of writings about how he's treating the Jews. And of course, there was a Polish anti-Semitic party. It's called Endek, the National Polish Party. I don't remember exactly what they called it.

But there were a few of them. And they had their newspapers. And they used to write many articles about the Jews, how bad the Jews are, and what the Jews did bad to Poland, and what they do with this, and what they do that. And of course, many Poles that did not have anything, or did not have any incentives to go out and work and better themselves, only saw that the Jews take everything away, that the Jews have everything. And this made anti-Semitism a little more.

So there were more incidents?

Well, actually, no incidents. The only incident that was once was in the county. Someone had killed-- I don't remember exactly. But this was that someone had killed someone in the county. Or it was at a time when a German ambassador, or councilor, was killed in Paris.

And that person that killed him was from Minsk Mazowiecki. I don't remember exactly whether this was the case. But there was some incident in Minsk Mazowiecki. And of course, it did not do much good.

But people still lived. And there was no other choice to do. But you had to live with them, to make the best you can.

But your freedom of movement or opportunity wasn't restricted?

No, freedom movement was not restricted. And of course, there were restrictions on higher education in schools. But there was no higher education in our town. Our town was only public school up to the seventh grade.

OK. And tell me again what your schooling was.

Yeah. My schooling was that, when I was a boy-- let's say, four or five years old-- the first thing you attend is a cheder. I remember that, till my time of the Jewish education, I went to four different rabbis, from the one that starts with small children, and bigger children, and so on, and so forth.

And then, when I was about 11, 12 years old, I was attending a school which taught only Hebrew, because my father was a Zionist. And he wanted us to know Hebrew. So we went.

In that day, 11, 12, and 13, I was going to Hebrew school in the morning, let's say from 9:00 to 12:00. From 1:00 to 6:00, I went to public school. And from 7:00 to 8:00 or 7:00 to 9:00, the rabbi came to the house to finish my religious education. So for a time, we were busy educating ourselves.

And you were bar mitzvahed when you were 13.

Yeah. Bar mitzvah, I got when I was 13.

What was the ceremony like then?

Well, the bar mitzvah ceremony was new to me when I came to United States. There was no such thing as elaborate bar

mitzvahs that they have here that was there. There was only, at a time when I was bar mitzvah, it came on a Saturday. I was given an Aliyah.

And I was reading from the Torah. Or I don't remember exactly what I read, the part that I supposed to. I don't-- but after that, there was a big Kiddush in the synagogue. And a lot of friends came to the house. And we had a separate party in the house.

But were you-- I just went to a bar mitzvah on Saturday. It was very elaborate. And the little kid was just put out on a pedestal.

You just want to a bar mitzvah. Do you want to say it?

Yes. We'll get back to the bar mitzvah. But you were going to talk about your great grandmother, Mariam Gelbard.

The picture you see here is my great grandmother. Her name was Mariam Gelbard. She was a baker woman. And the whole town knew her. She also made boxes for tefillin. She died in 1934 at the age of 100.

A story comes-- I was told a story here in the States when I came in 1947 through her son, that her son ran away from Kaluszyn. And he came as a young boy, maybe 16 or 17 years old. He came to America. His name was Wallace Gilbert. And he told the--

And when he contacted after the war to some Kaluszyn landsmans, I was told by some landsmans that went away before First World War or right after the First World War that, when her son ran away to the United States, ran away from home, she did not know where she is. And she almost forgot him. When one time came a picture from him and without a hat on his head, while sitting in front of the oven in the bakery, she saw the picture and threw it into the oven.

And you remember her?

I remember her being sick, laying in bed, in the early '30s.

I see. So she was a character. Very religious--

Yeah.

--obviously.

These two pictures are of my grandmother, who is the daughter of my great grandmother, and my grandfather. This picture was taken, I believe, in the 1930s. Her name was Rivka Rzondzinski. She perished during the Holocaust in 1942. My grandfather's name was Fischl Rzondzinski. And he died before World War II, sometime around '32 or '33.

And your grandmother Rivka Rzondzinski, R-Z-O-N-D-Z-I-N-S-K-I, lived in Kaluszyn?

Lived in Kaluszyn until the--

This is-- we went--

No, because I am not-- I don't want to come out on the tape that that's why I'm--

OK, so--

My grandmother originally lived with my aunt in Minsk Mazowiecki. Since 1939, after the Kaluszyn was burned out, lived with her daughter and her son-in-law in Minsk Mazowiecki. In 1942, after they start to liquidate the town of Minsk Mazowiecki, my aunt and my grandmother came to live with us in Kaluszyn. And my grandmother perished in the Holocaust in 1942 on the way to Treblinka or in Treblinka.

OK. And so--

My--

--she was living-- were living with you for a while.

Yeah.

Was she born in Minsk?

No. She was born in Kaluszyn, as far as I know. Yeah, they were born in Kaluszyn.

Oh. Oh, OK. And do you know anything about her background, how many brothers and sisters she had?

Yes. My grandmother had-- on my grandmother's side, there were three sisters. One sister died a long time ago that I did not know, that lived in Kaluszyn, who had together the bakery, who attended the bakery together with my great-grandmother.

Her husband, Moishe Aaron Siroka, lived until 1939-- I'm sorry, until 1939 when the city was destroyed, with his wife, and also had a bakery. After the city was destroyed, he went away and went out of town. But I do not know what happened to him.

All right. He was born in Kaluszyn also? You don't know. Do you have any idea how old he was in 1939?

This great-uncle of mine, Moishe Aaron Siroka, must have been, in 1939, maybe 65, 70 years old.

All right. And he and his wife, they ran a bakery. So your great-uncle Moishe Aaron Siranka-- Siroka owned a bakery, or he ran a bakery?

He ran a bakery when my great-grandmother was still alive. But later on, he ran the bakery also. But his wife died early. But I don't remember her. But he remarried. And he ran the bakery.

Oh. How many children did they have?

They had four children, three sons and one daughter. One son died during the Holocaust in 1942. One son went to Israel in the 1930s. One son went to Russia in 1939, as you will see with a family picture, as well as the daughter.

So those would be your second cousins?

My second cousins. They would be my second cousins.

So your Uncle Moishe Aaron, did you know him when you were a kid?

Yes. I know him very well, because we had a restaurant, and we needed cakes. And he was the baker that made cakes.

Oh, OK. That's great. And did he have people employed in his shop?

They employ in his shop, but only he, his wife, and his daughter, and a son, because the other son went away to Israel. And one son had a shop in Warsaw with my aunt in partnership. They were making knitted goods. I mean they were knitting and making garments for-- they were contractors.

So your Great-Uncle Moishe Aaron, do you remember, what was he like?

He was a man like you see today. I could see it today. You go in, in an area where a lot of Jews live. You can see the same type of man that he was then. You can see today also.

He was very pious.

If you look at a picture, you can visualize and go in, let's say, if you know New York, Borough Park, or Williamsburg, or the east side, you can see Jews like this just like him.

Do you remember him as being nice to you?

Well, he had no reason not to be nice to me. We were not the type of young boys that went out and making mischief to all the people. We had, as you call in Yiddish, [YIDDISH]. We honored the older people. We had respect for them.

And so do you know-- he probably had Yiddish schooling, and then--

Oh, yes. He was very well versed in--

He's not Hasidim, though is he? Or was he?

Yes, he was a Hasid.

He was?

Yeah.

Oh.

Whether he was a Hasid with his brother-in-law, my grandfather, I don't know. But my grandfather was a Hasid. We used to call this [? Kernowitz ?] Hasidim. Used to be, say, they have a Ger Hasid, or you have different, from different towns, rabbis.

People go to him for holidays. They go to him for benedictions. They go to him for very important questions. My grandfather was a Hasid of a rabbi called [NON-ENGLISH]. You need the spellings. I'll--

OK. So it was a very religious family--

Yes.

--the whole, extended family. But you--

My mother's side was very religious. But my mother herself not that way, because she was already another generation and more modern, although she knew all the rights and wrongs of religion. And in the house, we practiced religion.

It was kosher?

There was no such thing as a non-kosher home. In Europe, there was no such thing. You could not visualize, even the people that did not have much, to go out and buy for the house non-kosher meat. Younger people of my age at that time-- 13, 14, 16-- to be considered to be a wise guy went into a Polish delicatessen and bought himself a piece of kielbasa, and said he had it, like he conquered who knows what.

Did you ever do that?

I did that, too. But I didn't eat it. But I just had to.

You had rebel.

I had to be someone with a group, although my group, we did not go there, because it is required to-- maybe it was cheaper than Jewish salami then. Although I had it in our house, this salami, which was better quality. Of course, it was more expensive. But to me, it would cost me nothing. But it was a big thing to go in with a group and to participate.

So in your household, you celebrated all the holidays?

All the-- in our house, everything was 100% kosher. We celebrate all the holidays, although as I mentioned before, we did conduct business. The main thing, the restaurant was not open on a Friday night or till Saturday.

But we did sell gasoline, because we had employees that was a whole night. And they were gentiles. And they were selling the gas and brought the money in.

So there were a lot of vehicles at this time running on gas? I always get the picture of these--

Pardon me?

| were a lot of vehicles running on gas?

Oh, yes. If you ask about the vehicles, this was a main road, same thing like you have New York to Boston, or New York to Washington. It was a main road, traffic of trucks and buses, that were going with passengers to Warsaw.

OK. But there would be a lot of horse and wagons in town.

Oh, yes, there were horse and wagons, too. But we had nothing to do with the horses, since we had the gasoline station.

Did your family have a car or truck?

We had a truck for business. You ask me if my family had a car. I remember, in 1937 or '36, there was an old, beaten up Ford. And it was called a Model T Ford. And because we had two trucks, and we had chauffeurs, we were depending upon them to fix it, to run it.

And my brother bought the Model T Ford and was fixing it. It did run, but it looks like-- I don't remember what happened to it, because my father did not allow, because it was too taking away from things that he is supposed to do otherwise. Maybe it wasn't good enough or something.

But we had two trucks that were-- I don't remember exactly. But there was two. Or maybe, because two, there was different models at a later time. I remember the first truck we had was a 1926. Then it was a 1933 or 1936, Chevrolet trucks.

So if we can just finish the story of your-- I know we're skipping around-- of your--

great-uncle.

--great-uncle. So did he live also with your great-grandmother?

No. My great-grandmother lived with her daughter, Mariam.

Right. But was she--

--at the time when I knew her. Before, maybe she lived with her daughter, with his--

Where did your great-uncle live, what kind of--

In his house, in his place.

Oh, what was his house like?

He had the bakery. The bakery was downstairs. And upstairs, they lived.

OK. With four children.

With four children.

OK. And his wife-- what was his wife's name?

I don't remember his wife or his wife's name, because she died before I even knew her.

But then he remarried.

And he remarried.

Oh. Who did he remarry?

He remarried a very nice lady who worked with him continuously till--

OK.

Yeah.

And were the four children all by the first wife?

The four children were all from the first wife.

OK. And he didn't have any children--

No.

--by the second? OK. So did you ever get together with this great-uncle for family occasions?

The family occasions, we were together. This is not with the uncle. This was already the younger children, because the uncle was the age of my grandmother. And the age of the get together was my mother with her sisters and brothers and their children. So the older generation was not included in the gathering, unless the grandmother came, or the--

But the same thing like you have here. You invite the parents. Or you invite the children of the parents. Or you invite the cousins. Or the cousins are excluded. It was something like that, but not to that extent as it's here.

So you started to talk about your bar mitzvah and family party. How many members of the family--

There was no family party. The only bar mitzvah that I had was a Kiddush in shul. And there were a lot of people that were more friendly with-- more friends of my father. I invited them to our house to have another drink, and another fish, or another because usually, in the shul, you give parties. You give whiskey, cake, like sponge cake, and herring.

And you're inviting them into the house. You give them fish. Or you give them challah. You give them some other things. You give them beer. This was the party in the house, but no family things. There was no such thing as gifts here--

There wasn't?

--as a check. I don't remember that I got it, but I probably did. Maybe I got another talis kuten, a small towel. You know what a talis kuten is? It's a small towel that you wear on-- maybe I got it. But I stopped wearing it when I was maybe 10, 11 years old.

Oh. But you were 13 when you were bar mitzvahed.

Yes. But you see, that talis kuten you wear when you're a child.

Oh, OK.

Many times, you see the young kids. They run around. The fringe is still outside, and they're running.

And so just about the same time, you left school?

The school-- when I left school, I was about 14.

And that was the end of elementary school.

That was the end of the elementary.

And then you--

I went--

--to [INAUDIBLE]?

Yes.

After I finished the elementary school, I went to Warsaw to attend a trade school, which was run by the Jewish community, by the Jewish community on the Grzybowska. It was a street where the Jewish-- how do you call it?

I attended that school for about six months. And I lived with a family that were very religious. It was not too much to my liking. And I was a little bit of homesick.

That was 1934?

That was 1934.

What do you mean by they were too religious? What were they expecting from you?

What do I mean by too religious? That I had to sleep with a yarmulke on my head. I had to pray every morning. And the people that I lived with were distant relatives of my mother.

He was a barber that worked in the house only for those people that cannot go take shaves. Only very religious people came to take haircuts, and special haircuts that you cannot use a razor. Or just that was such a thing that was very--

Special.

--very special. I was too restricted. And this gave me a little bit-- made me a little bit lonely. And I came back to Kaluszyń, to the house. And from there, I worked in our business, because we needed me.

And my main work was-- we had the shifts, daytime and nighttime. And most of the time, I worked my nighttime,

because in the evenings, we used to go out with friends, I'd say till about 11 o'clock or 10 o'clock. And after that, I came home. And I attended the business at night till about 5:00, 6 o'clock in the morning.

Wow. You mean you worked at the restaurant and the gas station?

And the gas-- the gas, pumping gas, at the restaurant.

Oh, wow. What sort of things would you do with your friends in the early evenings?

We used to go--

Go to the movies?

The movies, we only went Friday night, Saturday night, or Sunday. Or we used to go out and-- let's see. Summertime, during the daytime, we used to go on bike ridings. In the evenings, we used to go out just walk on the street-- what do you call it-- strolling and telling story, just like you have fun here, but not such a degree that many time you see here.

The public school also supplied-- one school was open evenings so that children, that the students could come in and congregate there. And we used to play various games, domino or checkers. And we used to develop-- I don't know if you ever heard of literary cards.

You take-- you have in a deck four cards of each, four kings, four queens, four jacks, four aces, and so on. We used to make those cards-- by literary cards, we mean known literary people, like poets, or musicians. Or matter of fact, I wrote down here-- writers.

Composers?

Composers, musicians, writers. They were different type of well-known people-- politicians. And we used to play cards, just like you pull a card from someone. If you have four kings or you have four composers, you go out. First you go out with the cards. Then you win.

Oh. Oh, that's good.

We also played the blackjack and other types of games with cards. And this was our times we--

Did you start dating in your teens?

We had a group of friends, dating. But we did not go directly with each other. We were always going in a group, two friends, two boys and two girls, or three boys and three girls. I have some pictures of those friends.

These are my first two girlfriends. This is my first one. This is my second one. I did not bring my third one. I forgot to take the picture, which the third one was during the war from 1940 till 1942. But my fourth and last one--

This looks like a very modern girl wearing pants.

And that's my-- ultimate and last one is this one with my two daughters.

Wait a minute. This, your wife?

This is my wife.

She's not in this picture.

No.

But you met your wife in--

I met my wife in New York.

Oh, OK.

She is not-- my wife is not a Holocaust survivor.

Oh, I see what you're saying, your last girlfriend.

This picture was taken in 1936, '37 on vacation in Mrozy. Mrozy was a railroad station. We used to go out there for vacations. It's 5 kilometers from Kaluszyn-- with friends.

It's M-R-O-Z-Y.

That's right. On my right, [? IÅ¼a ?] PiÅ™knawieÅ›, that's her-- to my left, Masha Tennenbaum. All died in Treblinka from Kaluszyn December 9. [? IÅ¼a ?] PiÅ™knawieÅ› had a sister whose name was Lali. Lala, we used to call her. We called her Lala. This is what we called her, because she was a doll and looked like a doll.

Mm, cute girl.

The family had a store of liquor, a liquor store. She was my friend for many, many years. And--

Did she go to the same school as you?

We went to the same school, the same public schools.

Oh. And she left when she was 14 also?

Yes. And she--

What did the girls do when they left school?

Girls didn't do much. Some girls, that their family were not well-off, while needed, some girls went to work as a seamstress, to learn a trade. But these girls were well-off. The people were well-off. So they did not send them to [INAUDIBLE].

As I can remember, maybe-- because I did visit her when she was in Warsaw. Maybe she attended a school in Warsaw. I don't remember exactly. I don't remember exactly. Because I did see her in Warsaw a few times where she was.

But maybe you could talk about this being together in 1936 or '37 in Mrozy--

Mrozy, yeah.

--because I could write about that--

Yeah.

--episode. what

Were you doing there?

During summertime, we used to go--

Yeah, it's on.

--for vacation to a town called Mrozy, which is a railroad station 5 kilometers from our town. Our parents sent us there, because they had a friend that was running a vacation house for children of our groups. And we were there for about six weeks, four to six weeks.

Was it on water, or--

No. Water was about a mile away. And it was mainly in the woods, the house. And we used to get up in the morning. We used to play ball and go on hikes.

And although there wasn't much to do, but we enjoyed it, because it was in the air. We had fresh air. We had no one to tell us what we can do and not do, because the people that wanted us to be there treated us very well.

How many years did you go there?

I believe I went there two years, two consecutive years. I went there. And my sister went also there. There was no need for me to go home during this time, as the parents wanted to see us. So they used to come to see us, how we're progressing, because to send children on vacation was mainly that they should eat more.

And because we had everything in the house, we had to get paid to eat. So they sent us away to a place where we can stay with friends, and eat together, and be there. And of course, we--

I don't understand that. What do you mean, eat more? So you ate very good food at this?

So you are on fresh air. You get more appetite to eat.

I see. OK. Well, that's good. And you remember the food was good?

The food was-- they was catering us good food, mostly butter, and cream cheese, and the sweet cream, and fishes, and herrings, and all kinds of things, what we like, because nobody knew about cholesterol then. We had eggs practically every day.

So how many of you teenagers would be together here?

We were there about 18 to 20 teenagers.

Oh, it must have been fun. That's good. Did you sing songs together at night or--

Yes, we sang songs. Yes. I want to put on another picture. Here, I'll show you two pictures again. One picture is also myself with friends. We also attended the same school.

The one that stays with me, her name is Sarah Aaronsohn. She was married. She married after the war with a man by the name of Cooper. He died in France. She lives now in Nancy, France.

Do you still stay in touch with her?

Yes. I'm staying in touch with her by telephone. And she visit us a few times. I saw her a few times in her house. And--

So where were you rowing here?

That was also in Mrozy. That was also on vacation time.

There was a pond there?

Yes. The person that sits at the end of the boat, he is the son of the woman that was running the house, the vacation house. And this is [? IÅ¼a ?] PiÅ™knaWiÅ™.

The person in the middle, the two in the middle, one's name is Adam [? Kamieni. ?] He now lives in Israel. And his name now is [? Sela. ?] And the girl next to him is a girl that came to visit my sister. She's from Warsaw.

She died. I don't know where she is now. So she came to stay with us one summer. And she went for a vacation.

You look quite old here, all of you, to be doing this camp thing. You like you're in your-- well, you were. You were 17 or 18 years old. So that was really a luxury--

That's right.

--for kids that age not to be working.

This is a picture of the-- this is the mother of my friend that you see in the picture with the two girls, and the other one here. The one below her is her daughter, her younger daughter. The one next to her is the daughter of the woman that runs the summer house, which is a sister of hers.

Next to her is my sister. And the couple above are parents of the boy on the left, of this boy. This picture was also taken in that summer camp. See there? Around there.

So--

It's getting complicated.

Yeah.

So you had a very-- it was a nice break from your regular routine. there. But you don't remember what these two girls did when they went back to town after that summer camp? How young-- neither of them married before the war?

No. No. Masza Tennenbaum had relatives. They originally came from a town called Kobryn. That's about 50 kilometers east or northeast of Brest-Litovsk. That would be about 200 kilometers from our town.

She had relatives there. And her parents were not druggists. In New York or in Kaluszyn, there were not such a-- there were a drugstore. But there was also a store that used to sell ready-made prescriptions. You could get pills against a headache, like aspirins, or special soaps, like you have a drugstore today, but without the drugs.

But her father could have made drugs. But he was not allowed to, maybe because he was Jewish, or because maybe he didn't have the license to be a druggist. But he was there. So--

Did he own the store?

He owned that store.

And they lived in the store?

They lived there. They lived there in Kaluszyn for a time, all that.

You don't know if she was born in Kaluszyn?

She was born in Kaluszyn.

OK.

Yes. But she had an older sister and a brother. I don't know whether they were born in Kaluszyn or they were born in another town.

And she had an older sister and an older brother.

An older brother.

And she was the youngest.

Yeah, she was the youngest.

OK. And she had the same schooling as you.

That's right.

The school you went to was mixed.

In school, we went all together.

Boys and girls.

Boys and girls. Yeah.

OK. So it wasn't-- the Hasidic schools were segregated, weren't they?

No, this was a public school.

Oh, OK. But there were a lot of Jewish--

Yes.

--students.

As a matter of fact, the public school-- we had two public schools, one public school that only Jewish students attended, only Jews, although it was a public school. The only school that non-Jews attended with the gentiles were those that had very heavy accents. And to straighten out the accent, or teaching them better the Polish language, those had to go to a Polish public school. But we went-- everything was conducted in Polish only.

Oh. Oh, I see.

The public school-- although the attendance was all Jewish. But the schooling was only in Polish.

And teachers were--

Teachers were Jewish and Polish teachers.

Oh. Was Maja a good student?

Masza.

Masza a good student?

Yes.

Were you a good student?

We were all good students.

Oh. OK.

Yeah.

OK. But there was never any idea that any of you would go on to some secondary school in another city.

She went back to a school from where her parents came. How many years she went there, I don't remember.

The name of the town again is?

Kobryn, K-O-B-R-I-N.

OK. And her parents were from that town?

Her parents were from that town. And they settled in Kaluszyn. Since I knew them, they were living in Kaluszyn.

Before she was born.

I don't know. I only know her because we went to school together.

Oh, OK. All right. And you've told me a little bit about--

Idza.

--Idza. Her father was the one who owned the liquor store.

Liquor store.

And she had sisters and brothers?

She had one sister.

Right. She just had one younger sister.

She only had one younger sister.

She's adorable. Lala.

Now, the word [YIDDISH] is a doll. The word [YIDDISH] in Yiddish is a doll. Her name was different, but we didn't call her anything else but Lala.

Oh, she was beautiful. And Id-- Idzia--

Idza.

Idza? Idza, is there anything special about here that you remember?

We we're very good friends, all of us, with Masza and with Idza. As I said, she was my first girlfriend. How did she became my first girlfriend is a whole different story. And the story goes back as follows.

After each school year, the school made trips to towns in Poland, historic towns like Warsaw, Krakow, Kazimierz-- which was a king, Kazimierz, which was very good to Jews-- and to Gdynia, which is on the north on a port. And supposedly, on the way back-- we had gone by train.

On the way back, we were sitting at the benches. I was sitting supposedly next to her. And was was next to me. And we were sleeping, or having our heads this way, that way. And supposedly, my head touched hers. And her head touched mine.

And it came to know that a maid that used to work for us a certain time worked later on for her parents. And she used to come to us and go there, and used to tell stories, whether the stories were true, that she likes me. And she came to tell me. And I said, I like here, too. And this was the story.

But besides her, she was a very nice girl. And there was no reason not to like her. At the time, we did not think-- we were 13, 14-year-old children. We would not think to go out tomorrow and get married. But we were very good friends.

But then you said that this was also a girlfriend?

Yes.

But just a girlfriend, meaning--

That was a girlfriend.

--a friend who was a girl.

We can say more than a girlfriend.

Oh. You were very close.

Thank you.

Maybe she-- she looks nice. Well, tell me something a little bit more about here. She went to the same school as you also?

Yes. We all went. There was only one public school. One public school was one large building that had-- in that school we had from the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grade. All other grades were located in different parts of the town.

There were a building that had the first and second grade, and second and third grade, different grades. But that school was a large school with a large yard. We used to come there. And that was the main school.

And what did she do? Do you know what she did after she left school? Did she help in the liquor store?

No, she wouldn't help in the liquor store. Most of the girls didn't do much.

What did they do? I mean, I'm really--

There was not much to do. They used to--

Did they babysit littler kids, little sisters?

There was no-- no. Maybe she used to babysit for her sister. But--

Did she weave, sew--

Oh, yes. We were--

--embroider?

Maybe. But as I mentioned before, I believe that she went to Warsaw to a school, because I met her a few times in Warsaw, because I used to travel to Warsaw occasionally, because I had nothing to do also. I wanted to take a trip to Warsaw.

So '18, '19, '20, she didn't have any specific work that she did?

Then? No.

She wasn't--

'20s was already the war--

Yeah, that was 19--

--during the wartime, in 1939.

Oh, OK. So that changed.

That changed. And there was not much-- in a small town, there was not much to do.

OK. So between the ages of-- but most of these girls would generally married pretty young, eventually.

No. I would say there was no such thing as marrying young. They married in their 20s.

Oh, early 20s.

There was no-- 20, 21. There was very few that would marry younger, very few. And there was no accidents, I had to marry.

There weren't?

No. I wouldn't say to. No. There were more respect for girls than it's--

Even in the 1930s?

We never thought-- all right, say we used to be in love with the girls-- kiss, and hug, and touch. But to go to extremes, the risk--

No one did that.

I say it for myself that I wouldn't take a chance, because you never know what can happen. So nobody wanted to.

OK. So a nice Jewish boy wouldn't--

Do that. That's right.

All right. Even though you were very good looking.

Thank you. Wait till you see another picture.

All right, so to return to your grandmother--

I remember that, after my grandfather died--

Rifka.

Rifka Rzonczinski.

R-Z-O-N-D-Z-I-N-S-K-I--

Yeah.

-- was your--

Grandmother.

Mother's?

My mother's mother, my maternal grandmother.

All right.

After my grandfather died--

In the early '30s.

--in the early '30s, my grandmother got herself a kiosk to sell newspapers. And I remember there was a time they came-- an area that they made a train to go to the train, a small train, a feeder, because before, and even during that time and later on, there used to be special porters, special guys. They used to have a horse and buggy, horse and special-- what do you call it? Not a van. It's a-- there used to be a horse and carriage.

It used to take passengers from our town to Mrozy to go to Warsaw, which is west, or to go to Siedlec, which is east, to other places, wherever they need to go. Then it became-- the city made a train, a small train, with a huff-and-puff locomotive with one caboose, with one to carry passengers to the train. And my grandmother had there a kiosk to sell candy, and newspapers, and the sodas, and whatever there was.

And when the newspaper used to come in from Warsaw, it came by train to Mrozy. And from Mrozy, they used to bring in with that train to Kaluszyn. And she used to sell it.

Later on, the train stopped going, because the city was losing. The owner of it was losing money. And a man that used to be the conductor of the train bought himself a horse. And he was riding with a horse on the rails with a train to Mrozy. But it did not do good enough, because he didn't have enough money to feed the horse. So it's tough going.

So that kiosk was transferred to another part of town. And she had that kiosk in the town. Then we had to bring in the newspapers from Mrozy to Kaluszyn with the regular drivers, with the regular horse and carriage that was running.

But because there was competition-- there was another man that had a kiosk-- we as grandchildren, my brother or I, or my grandmother's son, used to go with a bicycle to Mrozy and get the pack of newspaper, Jewish newspapers and Polish newspapers, on the back, load it up on the back of the bicycle, and bring it faster. Who brings her faster the newspapers is able to sell it to those who were interested to read, because not everybody wants to buy a paper.

There was one that-- if one bought a paper, he used to give it to all his neighbors to read it. Or two of them bought a paper. You buy it today, I'll buy it tomorrow, because a paper used to cost 15 or 20 groschen, or maybe more. I don't remember exactly. But it was a matter of money that no one wanted to spend day, after day, after day. So from this, she was making a living. Later on--

How old was she then? I don't think you told me her approximate birthday.

I would say that, when she died, she must have been in her 70s.

OK. OK. Your grandmother was born about--

Around 1875.

In Kaluszyn?

Yeah, I would say in Kaluszyn. Yeah, I believe, because they all came from Kaluszyn.

All right. They went back for generations.

Yes.

OK. So she had the kiosk. And after your grandfather died around-- did you say 1933?

Yes, in the early 30s.

And her husband was a Hasid?

Was a Hasid. Yeah. But he did not live from the Hasidic. He lived-- he had a job going to the places of woods. How do you call it? The--

You said he was in the--

Forest-- the forest. And he used to-- when they used to sell the trees to make the wood, he used to give a assessment. I really don't know what he was doing. But I do know that he was connected with a forest kind of business.

All right. And your grandmother was just at home then with the children?

Yeah.

OK.

And she only started working outside the home after her husband died?

This is what I know.

OK. Well, that's very difficult, a woman her age to start working outside.

Well, to start. Yeah. But there was not much-- to run a kiosk is just to stay there and take her part. But because her daughter helped out-- because her daughter remained with the kiosk later on.

Her daughter--

The daughter, the oldest daughter.

What was the oldest daughter's name again?

Hanne. I did not put a name on.

Hanne.

Yeah.

H-A-N-N-E?

Yes.

She helped her mother with the kiosk.

Yes.

So her mother wouldn't have to stand up outside.

That's right. She helped in her family--

That's when it was cold and stuff.

Yeah.

It was colder than that. She helped out. And her family helped out. And they remained with the newspaper business, with the kiosk.

So she did that after 1933. And then that kept going until--

That kept going till 1939.

Oh, OK. She was still doing that. Did she only speak-- she spoke Yiddish in Poland?

Yiddish, yeah. My grandmother, she understood. I believe she spoke Russian, too. But not to me, because I did not understand Russian. And Polish, we did not talk to our parents in-- to our great grandparents in Polish. We talked to our grandparents only in Yiddish.

OK. Do you know what your-- it would be your great-great-grandfather. Did you tell me anything about him?

No. About my great-grandfather, I know nothing about--

OK.

--nothing of.

All right. Well, do you know how your grandparents met, by any chance?

No, I do not. In those days, there were no such thing as meet. My grandparents was only a made-up marriage, because you did not go-- they were more religious in that they would not be-- not to say they wouldn't be interested. But their parents would not allow for them to go out to see each other, and then say, we want to get married.

Right. So it was an arranged--

It was arranged marriages

Were they happy?

Evidently, if you've see Fiddler on the Roof. His dream, he said it-- do you love me? What's today's love? His parents told him. They'll get to like each other.

Do you remember anything about her house, where she lived?

I remember only that they lived in a house where my great-grandmother was with her, in a house. And my great-- she was in a bed there. I always remember my great-grandmother laying in a bed. She was sick.

Occasionally, she was out. But the few times that I went in to see my grandmother, she was there. I saw her there. But there was not-- what can I tell you?

Did she live near you?

No, that was not far away, maybe 100 yards.

Oh. Oh, she was very near you.

Yeah, near.

OK. Did a lot of the family members live in the same neighborhood?

Yes.

You did?

Yes. Most of the family lived in the same, unless they moved out. Which family members are you talking about? It's only my grandparents and my aunt, this aunt, that she lived in Kaluszyn. The other ones did not live there. For instance--

Well, you talked about your great-grandmother and your great-uncle. They didn't?

Yeah, all right, they lived 100 yards further. But this is already considered their second generation, the third generation of me.

Right. OK. Just trying to get the picture.

Yes.

All right. Before 1939, some of your family members emigrated to Israel?

Yes. Before 1939, my mother's sister--

Whose name was?

--whose name is Nechama Hausmann. Left for Israel with her husband, Meyer Hausmann.

They were Zionists?

Before I do that, I'll say it differently. Before the war-- let's say, about in the '30s, maybe '34 or '35-- my mother's sister, Nechama had a partnership with a cousin whose name was Fischl Siroka in Warsaw where they made the knit goods. They knitted goods and cut into articles, like sweaters and jumpsuits, for children. Later on, my mother's sister married and went to Israel. Another sister--

But were they Zionists?

Yes.

They were. So a lot of your family--

Practically all the family was Zionists, Zionist oriented.

How was the decision made? How did certain people decide to leave then for Israel? Was it a matter of-- because I understand there were only few places. Or--

They decided because-- first of all, they decided to leave because they were idealists. And they wanted to go to Israel. And of course, they also had to have a certificate, which the certificate is a permit from the British government that they can get into the country. So that's what they did. When they got the permit, there was-- just like today, somebody gets a visa from a country that it's out of someplace, and tries to get here, which is the most important thing.

But was there any idea of escaping something that might happen?

At that time, there was no thought about escaping. The only reason people went to Israel-- because they were Zionists. They wanted to help build a country.

About what year did she leave?

That was in the early '30s.

OK. And you mentioned some other family members who emigrated to South America?

The other families that emigrated to South America was my father's sister, to Argentina.

That was much earlier?

That was in the late '20s. That was-- maybe not late '20s, maybe in the middle '20s. And another sister went to France, also about the same time.

Just to make better lives for themselves? Or because--

That's right.

--they married people who--

They married people. And they were making for themselves a better life, for their husbands to make a better life in those countries. One was making wooden articles for toys and for furniture. And that was for Argentina. And the one that emigrated to France was a tailor. He had a very important tailor shop in Paris.

And you kept in contact with the cousins?

Yeah, we kept-- I remember the addresses from the cousins, from the relatives in Argentina and in France, because when they were writing letters in there, I used to read the addresses or address the letters, the envelopes to them. So when I came back after the war, I remembered the address in France of my uncle to see whether they are alive.

And after the war, somebody was traveling there. And I gave him the address, they should look up and see whether that address exists, and if they are there. And they did bring me a notice that a son was alive of that uncle of mine, which is my cousin. And we were in touch with them since.

Were his parents killed?

Parents were killed.

They were deported?

They were deported in 1939, in 1941 or '42, when the Germans started sending all the people to the concentration camps and to gas chambers.

They were deported from Paris?

From Paris.

But they are not in this picture. This, I'm talking about my father's family, from my father's side.

OK.

Yeah. And--

So those were the family members that were. Otherwise--

Those family members in this picture are all family members, from my mother's side.

Right.

From my father's side, I only have one picture, which is my father's cousins. And this picture was taken sometime, I would say, in the '30s or '20s.

And did all these cousins live in Kaluszyn?

They all lived in Kaluszyn. They all perished in the Holocaust.

So please talk about what happened after Germany invaded Poland.

After Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, we were on the belief, as we were told by the Polish government, that the war will not take long, that the German armaments are made out of wood and cardboard things, and things will fall apart, and they will not last long. But soon afterwards, maybe two or three days in the war, a plane passed by. And we thought that these is a friendly plane, because it came in so low.

And what it did, it just threw down a little bomb in our town, as there was a line in front of a bakery to buy bread. And a lot of people got killed. After this had happened, we realized that all the propaganda that we were told about before is not as true as it seems to be. And being that we had trucks and some other people and friends of our family had trucks, we decided that we'll take two trucks and go away to the east towards Russia. In the meantime, things will slow down and stabilize itself.

The reason why we went away is because the older people knew from the First World War that when the Germans come in, the first thing they do is they take the young men and the older men to work. And they tell them to work on the roads, forced labor, to work for them. And being that Hitler came to power, the fright was a little bit more than before. So everyone said for the young people to move away.

But in 1938, after Kristallnacht in Germany, nothing happened in your town?

After 1938, we were only frightened. But we did not think that this thing will come up, because when Hitler went to war

with Poland, it was only that he wanted to have the corridor to go through to Danzig, to take away that right, and so on. But nobody knew that this is going to come so far. And later on, everything-- his propaganda was that the Poles want to attack him, and so on.

But when the war came, all our thoughts were how to escape from Hitler, that they're coming in, because the radio and the news came in the Germans have entered Poland, and they are pushing certain areas into the country more and more. So my father and his friends took two trucks, and went away, about 20 people. And we took some food with us towards the Russian border.

Your whole family, your whole immediate family?

No. Only my father, my brother and I, and friends of ours, and friends of other people, and their families.

Your mother and sister stayed there?

My mother and sister-- at that time, my mother and sister and my grandmother, my father's mother, was living with us, as her husband passed away some 8, 10 years before. And they remained, because there were no-- nothing was taught that they will do anything to the women. So they remained.

After we went back about 200 kilometers from our town, we heard that the town has already been taken. But we did not realize at what cost. And we waited later on to go further and further away. We were up to the Russian border, about 3 kilometers from the Russian border.

The name of the town was Mezhyrich. It's a town past Ratno, Kowel, Lutsk, Rowno, and so on. Then, on September 17, the Russians came in. And the Russians came in from the other side, started to occupy the Russian area.

At the same time also came news that the pact that the Russians made with the Germans was that the Russians will go up to the Vistula. And the Germans will go up to the Vistula. And that will be the dividing line. Being that we were on the east side of the Vistula, we presumed, which is logically, that we will belong to the Russians. So while the Russians were pushing forwards, we were behind the Russians going with our trucks, going home to see our parents, to see our mother and sister and the family.

When we came to a town 33 kilometers from Kaluszyn-- which the town's name is Siedlce-- we were told that the Russians are not going to occupy until the Vistula. They're going back to the Bug, which is another demarcation line. And at that time, we heard the news that the town of Kaluszyn was bombed out, all, everything.

There was a big fight there, because there were many-- many groups of soldiers were there congregating. And they had to put up a big fight against the Germans. So the only thing the Germans could take revenge is they burned down the whole town.

Our house was on the outskirts of the city. Well, actually, we were coming from Warsaw to our town. We were the first or the second house entering the city. So the outskirts of the town remained. So our house remained standing.

So being that we were in Siedlce, we heard the bad news about it. We decided that, no matter what, we will go back to see our mother and sister and the other relatives and see what happened. When we came, we saw the very bad situation with the town burned out, and we were told how the fight had happened, that they took all the Jews and other people into the church and were closing the doors. They supposedly wanted to kill all the people.

But anyhow, when we came in, we started to realize that many people were living in our house, because they did not have anyplace else to live. So we see more strangers than our own. And so we start to negotiate with the people that were there either to go to their relatives to live there, as we had our relatives to take into our house, or to some people to give money to go to other towns, because they did not have anything. And slowly-- it took about maybe a week, maybe 10 days, I don't remember exactly-- the people vacated our house. And we took in our relatives to stay with us at the time.

Then the town was without any government. The Germans weren't in. The Russians did not come in. And the Poles did not know what to do. But there were the militia, the civil--

Wait. The Germans did not occupy the town?

The Germans-- being that the Russians were supposed to go up to the Vistula, the Germans moved out. And the Russians did not go in. It was very close-- did not go in. So the Russians didn't come in there. So the town was by itself.

But there were civilian employees of the town hall, of the town government. They patrolled. The city should remain and see what happened. A few days after we returned, the Germans started to come in. And they started to come in.

And they told the mayor of the city, which was a neighbor of us, to order the Jews to make a Judenrat, to make a Jewish government to attend to the Jewish things. But what they had in mind was not so much as to attend to the Jewish problems as to supply them with whatever they want. And their appetite became bigger and bigger.

They wanted for the Jews to supply them with furnitures for their occupation that they're going make to be there. And being that they did not have a place in the town, because the town was burned out, they moved into a town 5 kilometers from our town, which is Mrozy. And they settled there. And the Jewish Judenrat, the Jewish community, had to supply all the tables, and chairs, and beds, and everything there.

They also ordered the mayor of the town, which his name was Plywaczewski, to nominate 10 rich Jews that they should be responsible for anything they will want to. Among the 10 Jews was my father also. I wrote a separate article in Yiddish about the functioning of the Judenrat. This article I wrote in request of some Jews that came back from Russia and settled in Israel.

Being that we were very few from our town that remained alive, he wrote to me. And I responded to him. And I wrote a letter, an article in Yiddish, sent to them to Israel to publish it.

They took out a lot of items that needed, and put it in the book, of a yizkor book, of a commemoration book for our town. Maybe they have it. YIVO has it.

It's in Yiddish.

It's in Yiddish. I brought it with me here.

All right. Well, we'll deposit that in the archives. That will be useful. So--

To be exactly-- what happened, how it went through, through the time the Jews lived under the German occupation until 1942, is mostly described in this article. Being that my father was in Judenrat and doing all the things what the Germans wanted--

What specifically did he do?

Specifically, his main object was to make the laws, or their requests, or their orders smaller, which he many times succeeded, most of the time succeeded. For instance, although the town was living mainly in the center of the town before the war, when the town was burned, all the Jews-- there were also people that lived in the outskirts of the town. When the ghetto was made, the Germans ordered that all the Jews should go into the center, they should have more of them.

What my father did is to make the Jews live the way they are in the outskirts of the town-- wherever they were before, make it like that. When they closed the ghetto, because the ghetto was an open ghetto-- that means you could go in, you could go out. When they closed the ghetto, it also remained the way it was. Jews had no right to go out of town.

And most of the Jews that lived there, that remained there, made their livelihood from the villages, from the farmers that lived in the outskirts. They used to go out and sell them a shirt, buy from them the cheese, or the eggs, or anything. And this was their business. This is how they-- their livelihood.

The orders were not to go, because they will be shot. Of course, there were many instances that some were shot going to the railroad. My father succeeded in getting many permits for those people to go out during daytime. And there were many things, for instance, for the community itself. There were--