

RG-50.407.0103

Oral History: John Wingate, September 17, 1996

John Wingate, born in Warsaw in September 1919, the youngest of three children, including a brother and sister, describes: his schooling at a state school, while his brother and sister attended Jewish private schools; speaking Polish and Russian in the home; his father running a small wholesale toy business; a family financial crisis between about 1930-1934, which required his siblings to drop out of school; his father attending synagogue regularly but stopping (no reason given); not being bar mitzvah; a happy home life; at eighteen, joining HaShomer Ha'tzair; meeting his mother's family in Vilna in 1938; being aware of anti-Semitism but not experiencing it personally; recalling that Germans sent 8,000 Jews to Poland under Polish passports in 1938; mass confusion associated with the German blitzkrieg; leaving Warsaw for Bialystok in late September 1939 and staying with prosperous relatives there; going to Vilna after it became part of Lithuania and seeing his mother's family; returning to Bialystok; his family in Bialystok becoming fearful of the political situation and deciding to leave; organizing a party of seventeen people to travel to Vilna on December 31, 1939, but being arrested by the Russians for illegally crossing a border and being held until August 1940; being sentenced to a Russian labor camp, building a railway; the first few months not being bad but deteriorating severely after the Russians and Germans began their war; suffering from scurvy; being sent farther into wintry areas; being sent to Tashkent; being assigned to a kolkhoz outside Tashkent; meeting a woman, Paula, from Pinsk and marrying her; being sent to Moscow without his wife, who was pregnant at this time, in about 1943 to work in a ball bearing factory; his wife being sent to Osh* and giving birth to a son in about 1944; being informed that he must join the Soviet army (apparently, a Polish unit under Russian command) and being assigned to an administrative section; moving with the army to near Warsaw; in late 1944, moving toward Germany, first to Poznan, then arriving outside Berlin in April 1945; running a field kitchen to feed Soviet tank crews; not being fully aware of the extent of the Holocaust; traveling to Osh* to see his wife and son, but not being allowed to return to Poland with them; being demobilized in 1946; reuniting with his wife and settling in Lodz; spending two years in a DP camp in Bavaria; emigrating to New Zealand (via Australia) in 1948 and having a daughter; his wife dying of a psychiatric-related illness; relocating to Australia in 1953 at the behest of relatives there; knowing only of one cousin who survived the Holocaust but noting that his personal experience had more to do with being a constant refugee than as a direct victim of Nazi atrocities.

*Transliteration as heard