

Oral History: Julian Scelwyn, March 9, 1997

Julian Scelwyn, born May 22, 1927 in Łódź, Poland, describes: having an extended family on his mother's and father's side, all of whom perished in the Holocaust; an older brother; his father's textile business; a middle class existence; attending private school; a traditional, but non-Orthodox, Jewish home life; being aware of anti-Semitism in Łódź but not suffering much personally; his family being very aware and concerned about events in Germany but not imagining the extent of what eventually transpired; the "excitement" he felt as a twelve-year-old at the start of the war in 1939; attending a Jewish school, which was initially allowed by the Germans between about December 1939 and May 1940 [later corrected to March]; anti-Jewish violence and initial feeling of relief among some Jews at the creation of the Łódź Ghetto in the belief that concentrating their numbers might protect them; Polish jubilation at the creation of the ghetto; German restrictions imposed on Jews; living among eight people in a two-room flat; his grandfather being struck by a German and dying two days later of internal injuries—one of the first deaths in the ghetto; organization of the ghetto; despite a miserable existence in the ghetto, development of an "abnormally normal" situation until deportations began in 1942; some information filtering into the ghetto on outside events but no knowledge of the extermination program and probable disbelief if people did learn something of it; deplorable conditions in the ghetto; his father being in charge of supply in the ghetto, employing about 5,000 people, and his position benefiting the family's ability to find food; escape from the ghetto being hampered by lack of a place to go; being aware of deportations of children in 1942 [00:52:12]; not being aware of any kind of resistance to deportation orders; Jews being brought into the ghetto as others were deported; people's constant hopeful thinking about events as they unfolded; continuous death from starvation and sickness; his family remaining in "reasonable" health; people's persistent hope of survival, particularly after Stalingrad; final liquidation of the ghetto in August 1944 [01:10:30]; selection of 600 people, including his family, to stay behind and clean the ghetto; some of those remaining being assigned to dig mass graves in the cemetery; being aware of advancing Soviet forces in January 1945; expecting to be executed, many people "vanished into the ghetto" until they were liberated by the Soviets; everyone, including his father, mother, and brother, surviving; being moved to a camp in Jakuba*; fearing what the Poles might do and guarding the camp with "two rifles and one bullet"; returning to their original home in Łódź, which had been occupied by Germans; his father being given a government position in a textile factory; Julian himself returning to school, his mother remaining at home, and his brother beginning university; the family leaving in 1946 because "no one wanted to live in Poland anymore"; immigrating to Finland, where they remained for thirteen years and where he married and had a son; immigrating to Australia in 1959 and having two daughters and grandchildren.

*As heard.