

HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

OF

SAMUEL MAKOWER

Transcript of Audiotaped Interview

Interviewer: Gerry Schneeberg
Date: August 3, 1988

© 1998
Holocaust Oral History Archive
Gratz College
Melrose Park, PA 19027

This page left intentionally blank.

SM - Samuel Makower [interviewee]

GS - Gerry Schneeberg [interviewer]

Date: August 3, 1988

Tape one, side one:

GS: To begin with, would you please tell us where you were born, what year, and a little about your family life?

SM: I was born January the 6th, 1922 to a typical Jewish family in a small town in Poland. The name of the city is Przasnysz, near the Prussian border. As all Jewish children age four, I went to *cheder*, learned all kind of Jewish studies, then went to a Jewish public school. And after that to a Jewish high school, which was in an adjacent city, Mlawa. The reason was that my father wanted me to know Hebrew and further Jewish education and culture. I was a high school student when the war started, and since we were only twenty miles from the border, the German army occupied our city the next day. But, a day before that, most of the Jews left the city. Our family went to a neighboring city, Ciechanów, where we had relatives. My brother and myself, we went further, toward Warsaw. Unfortunately, the German army preceded us. It went faster than we could walk, and after a week we returned to our home in Przasnysz.

GS: Excuse me, are you speaking of the entire family, your eight brothers and sisters, the parents, all returned?

SM: Yes, all. Only one sister was already in Israel at that time. And one sister stayed in Warsaw. She was in Warsaw and she was, since Warsaw was at that time encircled, she couldn't come home. Several weeks after the war started, which probably made it toward the end of September, the German commander of the city ordered all Jews to come to the market. He put us on trucks and he did not want to have any Jews left in that place. He took us across the river Narew, where supposedly, they was suppo-, where supposedly the border, the new border between Russia and Germany was supposed to be drawn. Later, we were there a couple days, but later we had to leave on foot. We were told to go toward the Russian border. The atmosphere after we passed toward the part of Poland occupied by Russia was day and night. In the Russian part we could, there were movies, we could, there was light, while in the other part, in the former part, was darkness. We didn't have any electricity, and we were afraid to go out in the streets. The whole family, except those which were moved, our family moved to Bialystok, but there was no place to live, because there were too many refugees there. People, families, were occupying a corner of a room, in one room we were sleeping four, five, six families. The Russians offered us to go to, into deep Russia, and find work there. We waited, because a sister of mine was still in Warsaw. One day, every day I was going to the train, waiting, hoping, that maybe she will return, she will come, she will find out that where we are. And indeed this happened one day, because when Warsaw was taken, she came to look for us,

and she heard what happened. She organized a group of people in another city where my relatives were, and she came with them to Bialystok. And I was standing at the train when she came out, stepped out from the train. I, of course I was already planning and trying to find other people who will go with me, 'cause I did not want to go by myself, and try to bring them over.

GS: During this time, it was not, was it possible for any students like yourself to attend classes? Was there any school that you could go to?

SM: Yes, the Russians organized schools, and I went to a Jewish school, interesting, the, but it was for me a little bit, how to, strange, because the language, the teaching language was Yiddish, while I was accustomed to having it in Polish and Hebrew. But nevertheless, I attended, the few months which I was in Bialystok, I attended school.

GS: Was it possible to attend synagogue in Bialystok at this time?

SM: Oh yes. But it was difficult to pray, because most of the, a lot of people were sleeping in the synagogue. There was not enough place. All synagogues were occupied by refugees. After, about two months after my sister arrived, we all registered to go deep Russia, where, wherever it is, it will be. We didn't know where they will send us, but to have, in order to have a place to, to live, to stay. We were sent to the Ural mountains, on the border of Europe and Siberia. And everybody about age 16 was supposed to work. We were earning the wages of what, like what the same thing what the Russian people did earn. They were trying to build apartment houses for miners who were develop-, who were built-, and other people develop-, who were trying to develop the wilderness of the Ural mountains. Conditions were a little bit harsh, because we were supposed to work on construction 'til minus forty degrees. At minus forty-one we could go home.

GS: What kind of clothing did you have? Did you have warm enough clothing?

SM: We did not have, but the Russian people often helped us. They often gave us special warm clothes what they, what they had, and what we, wherever we could, we bought warmer clothing. You cannot wear shoes there winter. You have to have special, not made of leather, but boots made of felt. Otherwise one freezes, and so on.

GS: Did all of your family members have to work?

SM: Yes.

GS: Your brothers and sisters, and your parents?

SM: Yes, except my younger two brothers. They were, they went to school. I have learned to speak Russian after about couple months, and through the fact there was a young gentleman who was told from Warsaw, who was told by his father that he once had a brother in Minsk, and he had an old address there, where he used to write 'til 1920, '25. And after that he received no letters. So, he came to me and asked me to write for him a letter on the old address of his uncle. And to his great surprise, he received answer from a cousin who told him that he received the letter and asked him to come to Minsk. We were hired to work in the Ural mountains for one year. And indeed when the year was over, we were free to go wherever we wanted. And this young man went back to Minsk. We did

not know where to move. We wanted to leave the Ural mountains, our family, because of the very harsh conditions. My sister and brother-in-law—my sister in the meantime married, met a young gentleman from Warsaw, they married—and they tried to go back to the eastern part of Poland since he had friends in, not far from Bialystok. And he thought that there the conditions, at least climatic conditions, were much more reasonable. Unfortunately, he was stopped at the border, at the former Polish-Russian border by the N.K.V.D. [Russian secret police], and told them they cannot go there. So he remembered the friend for whom I used to write letters in Minsk, and they went to Minsk. They found this man, and his cousin arranged for them an apartment and a job. Maybe for people who don't know, it would be, it should be explained that life in the, in Russia at that time, in the Soviet Union, in a large city like Minsk, Moscow, was different from the place where we were in the Ural mountains. In Minsk you can go in, and buy eggs in a store. You can go into a store and buy sugar. In the Ural mountains, sugars were seen by the people three times a year, on the first of May, on the October Revolution, on the anniversary, and on New Year. But in Minsk you could go in and buy.

GS: Can you tell us a little about the living conditions other than this terribly cold climate? What kind of housing did you live in? What was the food situation other than this sugar shortage?

SM: Each family had a room, so the whole family slept in one room. The, and this is what I said, we were building houses so they wanted to develop it, and but obviously, initially, the nice apartments were given to the members of the party and engineers and so on. And we were living in the older section. But...

GS: Were there many Jewish families there?

SM: We came there about fifty Jewish families. Previously there were no Russian Jewish families. But we met there a couple Russian Jewish engineers. They were very nice, tried to help us as much as possible.

GS: What was the attitude of the non-Jewish people?

SM: Oh very nice. They tried to help us in as much as they could. We were called there "the westerners" and they told us the suits which we had on, what we'll never see such a suit in Russia, that we should wear to work different clothes and they tried to help us as much as they could. As a whole, I was left with very good, fine memories of the people. Some of them were sent there because they said something against Stalin or they were previously land owners and were sent away.

GS: So these people were being exiled from their homes.

SM: So some of them were exiled, some had to live there—they were free to move, but if they wanted to go, they had to go to the N.K.V.D. and receive permission to, to, so it was as a whole, a place where people were sent away. But there were also a lot of volunteers who came to, found work there, and lived there.

GS: But generally you found that they were hospitable...

SM: Very.

GS: The Soviets were helpful?

SM: Very, very, very helpful. Very friendly.

GS: Were you asked to register for Soviet citizenship? Was that offered to you?

SM: We received, we were not asked, we were told everybody is supposed to have a passport, and we had Russian passports. Like any Russian, there is nationality written, nationality, we had written Jewish.

GS: So you weren't given a choice as to whether you wanted to remain a Polish citizen? You were just given the passport and made a Soviet citizen.

SM: Passport, and that is that. Right.

GS: Did you ever think about going back, as your, was it your sister and brother-in-law?

SM: They did, but they tried to go, it was still Poland. It was still the Soviet Union but a part of Poland...

GS: Oh, right.

SM: Which they went to.

GS: Right. So they were not leaving the Soviet Union.

SM: No, because if to leave it would have been to leave to Russia, to Germany, and, there was no comparison, because here it was cold, but you still could go to a, to a movie, and you, and there the libraries were open, and you could go read and, or travel. I even went back, because my mother became sick, and we, and she stayed in a hospital in Bialystok, and then when she was all right, I went back and brought her to, no, to the Ural mountains.

GS: You had this freedom of motion.

SM: Oh yes, we could, yes, we could, we were not, we signed an agreement that we will work for this company one year. And for this they paid our transportation. And we were supposed to work, although we did not understand what we signed, but with everybody signed, because everybody wanted to look for a place where to, to live. So after the year was over, my sister and brother-in-law settled in Minsk. And since we did not have enough money for everybody to go, so I was the next one who left to Minsk, because they described conditions were like day and night, the difference between Minsk and the Ural mountains where we lived.

GS: During that year, that first year in the Soviet Union, did you have contact with any Jews in other cities, other parts of the Soviet Union, or in Poland?

SM: No.

GS: No, you had no contacts.

SM: No. The only contacts in other cities, other came in Minsk via this friend who worked and because I was his translator, or, I did write the letters for him and this is how they called me actually... and his cousin married a young, a Jewish officer in the army, who was able to arrange for these things. In Russia you have to know the right people in order to be able to, to arrange certain things. And a lot of people want to live in large cities,

but you cannot live in the large city unless you have a job. And you cannot get a job unless you have, you live in the city. So for, if somebody who wants from another place to come to a Minsk-like, a city like Minsk, Kiev, or Moscow, or Leningrad, it's impossible. Practically impossible, unless you know the right person who can arrange. This cousin of, for whom, of this guy for whom I, to whom I wrote the letters, he was such a guy who knew to arrange. He arranged for his cousin to stay, after that for my sister and brother-in-law, and when I came, he arranged also for me to get a job so that I can stay. But what I did not know is that the next war approaches. I managed to come three weeks before the Germans attacked Russia.

GS: So now two years have passed, now 1941?

SM: Was a year-and-a-half, no, a half, like, because I did not move immediately. It took time...

GS: Right.

SM: Because at first this guy from Warsaw moved and then my sister, and it took time 'til they became organized, and then they said, "Hey, the next one can come." And so slowly we wanted the whole family to move out from the Ural mountains. When the war started, we tried initially to walk toward, toward, toward Moscow, but it happened again after two or three days on the way that the German army was, we found the German army in front of us. And we didn't have any other choice but to return, because we thought at least in Minsk is a large city, maybe we'll be able something to, somehow to survive. The, about a month after the Russians... the Germans occupied Minsk, the ghetto was organized, and we moved in into the ghetto. At that time my sister had also a little girl, so we were four people in one room. We, initially, we could go out to work. We were getting food. We were getting very little, but somehow we tried always to organize. My brother-in-law and myself, we used to leave the ghetto and go, go out, into the Russian sector, into villages, bring food into the ghetto.

GS: How did you get past the guards?

SM: This was relatively easy to do, because it was not like a ghetto, Minsk, in Warsaw where they made walls, built walls around it. This was still made of, with wire, so we always carried pliers to cut the wires and then wherever we went, we left, we twisted them back, and it was not so difficult to leave. The question was, when you leave, what do you do then? After a short time, the so-called, we called it simply pogroms, started. The Ukrainians and S.S. were coming, occupying a certain section of the ghetto. There were about 120,000 Jews initially. And they, they cleaned out 5,000, 6,000, took them out, and killed them. We, after that even knew where they were taking them to shoot.

GS: Were there particular people they were taking? In other words were there people who were involved with, was there a *Judenrat*? A council?

SM: There was a *Judenrat*.

GS: And were the members of the council taken? Or...

SM: No, initially the members of the *Judenrat*...

GS: Just indiscriminate?

SM: Indiscriminate, they just took a certain section. And we had been, had we been in this, we would have disappeared, like the others. When this happened, we started to build places to hide. Also they were catching people to take to work, and we wanted, while we wanted to work, because by going out to work we could always organize something to bring food, to bring something into the ghetto, we wanted to choose where to work and not be taken to work. So we built in our, in the room where we, where we lived, we built a double wall where we were hiding. Whenever some of our neighbors used to wonder, how come that we used, everybody was trying to hide somewhere, and we were running fast into the house? And then they saw Germans or Ukrainians going in, and not taking us. They, they came in, looked, but they apparently did not know, we did not tell too many people except later we told our neighbors, that we had a double wall where we could hide. When the Germans started to take women and children also in, for, for the so-called, these *Aktionen* they called, but it was, we called them, pogroms, then we built something different for my sister and her little girl, because little child was, it was dark between the two walls, and she was crying. So we built something under the ground on the first floor, a deep opening. I used to let them in, them means my sister, brother-in-law, with their child, and then I used to go back and hide in the double wall. We survived like this for about a year, but we saw that we cannot, it will not, we cannot, the ghetto became smaller and smaller. They brought in Jews from Hamburg, from Germany, and slowly killing them too. We decided we have to escape, go away. We tried to look for contact with people who were fighting the Germans, and finally we did reach. We were hiding in our place somebody whom the German were searching for. And in this way we wanted to go out into the forest and join the partisans.

GS: This is now about one year later after...

SM: About a year later, right.

GS: The Nazis took over.

SM: It was about a year-and-a-half. We, but the problem was we could not leave a little child. We couldn't go with a little child into the forest, into a forest where we did not know where we will be. But, in a place where my brother-in-law and sister worked was a decent German soldier, who tried as much as possible to help us. We asked him if he can find a place for the child, in a, in a orphanage home. And he arranged it.

GS: How old was this child?

SM: Two years. We taught her a Russian name and this soldier took her and after that for some time he was taking my sister out to see, to see her, but not close so that they will not, that she will not see her, see them. Actually, we did it because there was one pogrom four days long where all not working women and children were killed. My sister did hide into, in the place where we had made, so she survived it, and after that, this child was the only child in ghetto. And we, so this was the reason we decided either we'll all die, or we have to do something, arrange some place for the child to be. About a month

after the child was, was accepted by, in this orphanage, we left. I joined a partisan group which was about twenty people. My sister and brother-in-law were in another, in another group.

GS: Excuse me, were these Jewish, or non-Jewish?

SM: Mostly non-Jewish. There were some Jews, but,...

GS: And they accepted you? What was the attitude of the people in these partisan groups?

SM: Oh these groups were, accepted us without,...

GS: Fully.

SM: Fully, obviously, there were cases of antisemitism, there is no doubt about it, but there were many Jews in the, in the partisans. As a matter of fact, in the group where, which I came to, there were initially twenty people. Actually I left this group and went to another one which was larger. And there were a number of Jews. The person who organized all the, or maybe, let me talk what did we do? What was our objective? Most of it was not to fight the German army, but German communication. We were blowing up bridges, blowing up trains. This was the main thing. And the guy who organized all this blowing was a Jewish lieutenant. Unfortunately he did not survive.

GS: When you say lieutenant, had he been in the army?

SM: He was in a, he was...

GS: So he...

SM: A Russian...

GS: Russian army.

SM: He was a Russian in the Russian army, and,...

GS: But he worked with the partisans?

SM: But he was the, instead of during the, during, at certain fight he was wounded, left, he did not want to, was surrounded, he did not want to go into captivity. He escaped and then joined. Most of the partisans were former soldiers. Some of them were leaders of the Communist local government who were afraid that they will be killed by the, taken, and slowly also local people started to join.

GS: Were you the only Polish people?

SM: No, after that there were two more, two more. In other way, local people. There were several people who were hidden in the forest, and they, they were doing, one was a shoemaker, and we were going to him and after that he joined to, to, to give him some work, and after that we told him, "C'mon, join us." So he became also a partisan. He was a local guy from a nearby village who escaped with a family and lived. He built himself a hut in the forest, and since it was a big forest, the Germans were scared to go in there. And there were about 10,000 partisans in this forest.

GS: Can you describe what your daily life was like? What were your living conditions?

SM: Oh, we moved from place to place initially. After that when the movement, the partisan movement grew, we have like permanent, built permanent huts in the forest, with about...

GS: Were there families with you?

SM: Later, in our place were not...

GS: Just men.

SM: No families. But, there were, there was a group of about 400 Jewish family people who were not far away, who escaped, and they were allowed, they lived under, so to say, the umbrella of the other partisans. The, usually in the morning we're getting up like, either standing guard and so on, and each time from time to time we had to go to do something, to go blow up a train. Usually it was done by about ten people. Most of the bombs were homemade, devised by this Jewish lieutenant. We didn't have enough ammunition. We didn't have enough explosives. It was later that Russian planes started to arrive, land in our forest, bring ammunition and take the wounded back. But initially everything was homemade. Our initial bombs were simply large shells left from the Russian army when they were escaping when the Germans occupied. We used to drill holes, put there the, I don't know how it is called in English, from a hand grenade, the, the one which starts the explosion, put it in.

GS: Material, or the...

SM: Not the material.

GS: Was it the pin?

SM: Yes...

GS: The pin that gets pulled? The activator?

SM: We used to open the pin, the part which has the, with the pin, we used to put it in into the, into the fifty...

GS: Shell.

SM: Pound shell or, we used, around the pin put a long string, and hide behind a tree. When the train, put this under the rail, the railroad. When a train came, we pulled with the string. We didn't have electric, like I see here in the movie. We pulled the string, and the pin was, was out and it blew up. We always chose a place where there is a certain, where it is high so that the explosion was always blowing off the whole train down the, down a slope. Initially we didn't need much explosive to put in, because the trains were going fast. After that, the trains were going very slowly, or they saw, they thought in beginning that these are automatic, so they put two, three wagons of sand in front, the Germans. But we didn't care whether because we did it manually. Usually we tried to blow whether we saw fuel or people. When the train started to go slowly, we had to make larger size bombs to put under the, under the railroad.

GS: Was most of the planning, the strategy done by this Russian army lieutenant, or did you make decisions on your own?

SM: No, this was, usually we said, you, this, there was a commander, and he was choosing for each time another, we were divided in groups of twenty people and from these twenty people each time another group had to go and blow up, try to blow up a train, train. The terrain where to do it was always, we had local guys. They knew the place, and they knew the best, because not only was it important to blow up, it was also important to escape after that, not to, and not to lose people. Because the objective was not, the most important for us was do something damage and run away alive, so that we can do, continue to work. Later when we started to get contact with the Russian army, when we were started, and planes started to come and bring us TNT, it was easier and the objective changed. Instead of blowing up trains, we started to blow up the railroad itself. So we used to call it a concert. We go to arrange a concert, for a concert, because we stopped going a small group, eight, ten people, but 200 people who went out to the railroad and the German, the Germans used to have every five miles they used to have posts. But there used to be three, four, five people. When they saw a bunch of 200 people running toward them, they used to escape. And we used to divide into groups and I was usually the one who was putting the mines. This was my job. Blowing up certain things was my job always to do in our group. So we used to then put in only 200 grams TNT under each train... railroad. And while we were walking behind us were going people with matches and lighting it, setting it off. So it started to blow while we were still planting mines a little bit further up, and this is why we called it we go for a concert. And usually such a thing was happening, we knew, when we went for a concert we knew that the next day the Russians will start an offensive. And they wanted us to destroy the railroad so that no supply will come to the front. As a matter of fact, we were all starting to move backwards into Poland each time when they came to Minsk, we were moved back toward Bialystok, to keep on doing this, blowing up the railroads. And soon they were running out of railroads, the trains, because if we blew up a train, one, they pushed this off and a half an hour later other trains could pass. But if we blew up for two, three, five miles, all the, all four lines of the track, they didn't have enough rails to fix it. Very often for a week or two weeks they was, they could not use the line.

GS: You mentioned that a guard, a German guard seeing a large number, 200 people coming, would run away. Were there ever large groups of soldiers sent knowing that, once you started to do this, did you ever encounter any large groups?

SM: Oh yes, there were many. We were several times encircled by the German and Ukrainian armies, 50,000, 100,000 soldiers used to be taken from the front and circled our, our place and they tried to, to destroy it. They even wrote, in one letter wrote the whole partisan movement destroyed and even the name of our commander was that he was dead. I remember I showed it to my commander and said, "Oh Sam, go if so. Next week go show that we are alive." And they sent us to blow up a train. [laughs]

GS: Ahhh...

SM: So, something like this...

GS: Do you remember the last name of that commander?

SM: Commander? Yeah, Zeitzer.

GS: Zeitzer.

SM: He was a Russian, but there were many Jewish, Jews not far away. Actually more south in Polesha was a, I heard only stories about him, that,...

Tape one, side two:

GS: This is side two of the tape with Samuel Makower speaking.

SM: This gentleman was a legendary figure in the partisan movement. He was called *Dyadya Vanya*. And he was Jewish. Today I remember, I used to know after that his name, his, but today I forgot.

GS: This is the Uncle Vanya.

SM: Yeah. Then there was a group of, a Jewish partisan group. Several hundred Jews from, they were from, mostly Vilna, Minsk, Bialystok, from this area. And they were also in one of the, in one of the forests of White Russia. I today forgot the name of their *otryad* [detachment], is in Russian the name of the group, of the partisan group. Occasionally, on trips and on walking I used to meet Jewish people, and from time to time I used to get regards from my sister and brother-in-law. My brother-in-law was wounded, and he was, and he and his sister were taken out by plane to, into Russia.

GS: You said your sister and brother-in-law joined another partisan group, and both of them were working with this group.

SM: Yeah.

GS: That was a group, I would assume, that had both men and women, but the group you were in was all men?

SM: No, there were women, too.

GS: There were women also.

SM: Yeah. Not many remember, but there were women.

GS: Right. But, for the most part, single people, or some married, but...

SM: Some married, but mostly single people. Initially I was the youngest in my group, but after that a younger, a younger kid [laughs] came and,...

GS: When you joined the part-, this is the first partisan group, how old were you? In '42?

SM: Actually I was already, it was '42, so I was twenty.

GS: Twenty.

SM: But all, most of the people who were, were soldiers already. They had been to the, to the army, so they were all older than I, than I was.

GS: Older, right. And then how long did you remain with that group?

SM: 'Til 1944. In 1944 it was a funny way how I met the Russian, the Russian, army. We were told that, we saw, we read, I listened to the radio and sometimes also to foreign radios. And we knew that the Russian occupied Minsk and they were going toward the forest or toward Bialystok. And the question was, will we be able to survive, because we could not fight the German army when they retreated. However, they somehow avoided the forest, mostly they were small groups. The small groups we were fighting. And in one such case, we took about fifty or sixty German soldiers prisoner. Initially, with prisoners we... we had to move from place to place. We couldn't keep prisoners. But this was already

towards the end, and we were taking prisoners toward our camp. We had to pass a big road. And I gave them order to lie down, and I told them if they'll, when we had to, when we had to pass the big road, we went first out to see quiet. And suddenly we heard the noise of tanks. We were sure these were German tanks. And I told the German soldiers if they'll move and yell, they'll be the first to get the bullets. So they were all quiet. And when we saw the tanks, were not Germans tanks, they were Russian tanks. And then...

GS: I have one question. My question is, where did you get the ammunition, your weapons, and also where did you get your food?

SM: Ammunition, initially we had from local people. When the German-, when the Russian army retreated, they left huge amounts of ammunition in the forests. And for some reason, the people didn't hide it. We used to get from the people machine guns, even all kinds of ammunition, from machine guns to even, no, *pushki* in Russian, cannons. For some reason they were hiding them. Whether they were thinking that maybe these will be for Poles, against, because this was in Poland, in a Polish part, or they wanted to have it as some kind of a bargain, we don't know. But we were getting it from them. Sometimes we had to force, to take it by force. When somebody told us that this and this guy has hidden a machine gun, we used to go away and tell him, "Listen, if you'll not give it to us, it means you are for the Germans. Means we should kill you." And obviously we did not kill anybody of them, but sometimes...

GS: You persuaded them.

SM: Persuaded, so such, [chuckling] this helped to get the ammunition. Later...

GS: And your food supply, how did you get that?

SM: Food supplies we were taking, getting from the people.

GS: They gave willingly?

SM: Occasionally we told people, "You have to give," so-and-so and so on. Later toward the war, we had in each village, there was a partisan who was in charge. And when, and he used to say, "Oh, you two people go to this room to eat, and this, to this family and this family." And the people, the local people where we lived, often, accepted us and I used to have already a house where always the lady always found something warm for me when I was hungry to eat. So, and we were going, there were always families of policemen from which we took away everything. So, if we saw some kind, cows of, which belong to the Germans, we used to take it from them. And also from time to time we took it from the people we know, if, we left each family, each farmer had at least one cow. But if somebody had more than one...

GS: They had to share.

SM: They had to share.

GS: Did the Germans ever come into the forest where you were here?

SM: Oh yes, they tried, but they were all scared. If they came, they came in a large, large number.

GS: But not large enough to take over and to kill all of you partisans.

SM: They, they, if they came, they were at two days, three days, four days. We were retreating.

GS: It was a large forest.

SM: To fight with them we only, we only, we tried to avoid fights, actually, because we did not have the type of ammunition they had. But where we had to, we did fight. As a whole, they were, the Germans were scared of the forest. More difficult was with Ukrainians. They were not as scared, and with them we had often fights, and most of the partisans killed were actually killed by Ukrainians, more by Ukrainians by, than by Germans. We had also a lot of Ukrainians also in our side. As a matter of fact my commander was Ukrainian. But still, they gave us a lot of trouble. And when I said, the, I'll never forget the encounter with these Russian tanks, when they, they stopped when they saw, when we saw Russian tanks, they got out and they stopped. They thought in beginning, hey, who are this? And then, they, asked us, "Hey, who are you?" I said, "We are partisans." They started to kiss us and they saw the German soldiers, we were, we asked them, where, what to do with them. So they told us to go to the next city and where the army has a camp for them. So we took them there and for the first time in two years I saw, I walked on asphalt. I thought already sometimes in the forest, I thought, will I ever be able to walk on concrete? On asphalt, and not on mud?

GS: So at this time now it's '44.

SM: This was, yes, '44. And...

GS: And you remained with the partisans until the end of the war?

SM: Until the end. In '45 I went into Russia to find my mother and I had there two brothers and sisters.

GS: Where were they during that time?

SM: They were still, still in...

GS: Back in...

SM: Back in the Ural Mountains. At least...

GS: Ural. That was a safe place.

SM: It was safe from point of view, yes. They, they suffered hunger and various kind of deprivations, but this was the same thing what the whole Russian population went through. At least—they worried about us, they were sure that we are not alive, although with the first plane which landed in our, in partisans—I sent a letter to them. So this was, and I told them that my sister and brother-in-law are also alive, and so they knew after that that we are alive. But still, it could happen every other day something could happen. And later my sister and brother-in-law, when they were near Moscow, he was in a hospital there, and from there already they wrote letters so they knew that they survived. And in '45 I went, picked up, it took some, it took several months to arrange all the papers. It was '46 that my, the family left, moved back to Poland. We were sent to Stettin [Szczecin]. No, we didn't, I went to the place where we, Przasnysz, where I was born. I was there only a half an hour, and I could not, I couldn't stay, because it...

GS: Nothing. No life there.

SM: No, no Jewish life.

GS: You mentioned another place where the family went, in '46. Szczecin?

SM: Oh, Szczecin. This is, this is the part of, Szczecin is, was, is a, was once a German city which was, now is, was, Poland occupied it, take it. Now it is Poland. And the German population was sent out, and they tried to Polanize it, and they sent also Jews who returned from the Soviet Union they sent there. In Szczecin I got in contact with Zionists movement.

GS: Szczecin, can you spell that name for me?

SM: In English I believe it will be, S-T-E-, Stettin, S-T-E-T-T-I-N. It is a large port.

GS: You were there from '46...

SM: From '46 to...

GS: Or '45.

SM: '46 to, 'til about '47.

GS: A year.

SM: Right. I was approached there by a Zionist group. They needed to arrange to send children, a train with children, a few hundred children, toward Krakow, so that they can take them out of Poland. And they couldn't get a train. They, as a former partisan I knew some people. Can I, can I arrange it for them? I arranged it, as long as, I told them if they will give me some people to help, to keep so many kids in,...

GS: How many children?

SM: About 200.

GS: And how old were they? Young children?

SM: Young, from, eight to about, to fourteen, fifteen.

GS: These were children who had been orphaned?

SM: Orphaned and they, there was an orphanage home in, organized in Szczecin and they wanted to send them to Krakow. From Krakow they had a way to send them through Czechoslovakia, out of Poland. I organized a train. They couldn't get a train. I said, "I'll get you a train!" And they promised me that, but I told them I want something for it too, and this is, I want my family also to be able to move out from Szczecin to, to Germany at that time. This was the only place where we could [unclear], because this was close to Germany. And this was arranged. I brought the children back, brought the children to Krakow and I returned, and a few months later I was told that there is a possibility to move, and we left. Actually, not all. Two of my sisters had to go another way. They went through Vienna.

GS: How many of your family were able to leave?

SM: Oh, it was my mother, two brothers, and myself.

GS: Your father, died earlier?

SM: My father, yeah.

GS: Did he die of natural causes?
SM: He, unfortunately he did not know that we survived.
GS: So then you went to the West.
SM: To the West, to Berlin.
GS: To Berlin.
SM: And in Berlin we stayed for some time, where I started to study in Berlin.
GS: You went to the University?
SM: To University, yeah. And my two younger brothers volunteered when the wars in '48 started in Israel, they volunteered. They went to fight the war. I had enough wars.
GS: When did you make the decision to come to the United States?
SM: It was just before I got my Ph.D. My mother was that time in Israel, and I went to visit them. And I talked about, I am a chemist, and I talked about employment possibility, and I saw that it's not easy.
GS: In Germany.
SM: No, in Germany I didn't want to stay.
GS: In Israel.
SM: In Germany I wouldn't have, but in Israel there is not easy to get employment as a chemist. In one place they told me "*Yesh lanu chimayim k'mo zefef*", which means we have chemists like tar, like plenty. In other words, plenty, enough chemists. Cannot find a job for them. So that time I decided I'll go to United States.
GS: But the others in your family did go to Israel?
SM: Yes.
GS: And remained?
SM: I still have a brother and sister in Israel. One brother. And my older sister, who was with me in ghetto, she already was in United States.
GS: Oh. So you came to the United States then and completed your education?
SM: No, I got my Ph.D...
GS: Oh, you got your Ph.D...
SM: In Germany.
GS: In Germany.
SM: And then I came here.
GS: You mentioned the child of your sister who was placed in the orphanage. You never got her back?
SM: No, could not, couldn't find her. Allegedly we talked to people who, the orphanage didn't exist after the war, and allegedly she died.
GS: What year...
SM: But we're not sure.
GS: What year was it when you arrived in the United States?
SM: I arrived in '56.

GS: I'm curious to know a little more about your family, if I may ask you. There obviously was a Zionist feeling within your family. Was it a religious Jewish family, or Socialist? What was the tradition?

SM: My mother was very religious. My father was, had certain Socialist ideas, but more Zionist.

GS: You mentioned that there was little antisemitism that you experienced when you were with the partisans. Earlier in your life in Poland, had you experienced antisemitism?

SM: Oh yes [unclear].

GS: Directly.

SM: There is, as a child I was "God-killer" whenever there was a religious holiday—you had to try to avoid the Polish children. There was, Poland was highly antisemitic.

GS: What would happen if you met these children on a holiday? They would taunt you?

SM: Oh we used to fight.

GS: Beating?

SM: Oh yes. Since they were always in majority, was, we had finally to escape, to run.

GS: You never thought about wanting to return to Poland?

SM: No.

GS: You held Soviet citizenship, however. Had you ever considered staying in the Soviet Union?

SM: No, after I have seen the paradise of the working class, I decided to go to hell.

GS: [laughs]

SM: [laughs]

GS: The experience had been good in that it saved your family? But it wasn't a...

SM: Yes, to a certain degree I, one has to say that when, in 1939, when the Jews needed help, the only country which helped was Russia. America did not let in any Jews. Was a ship of Jews from Germany who were in Miami that were in New York, and I was in Germany when the Jewish community gave some kind of a prize to the captain of the ship who tried, and had to bring the people back to Germany. But the Russians opened the borders, "Come in!"

GS: Was it that they needed labor at that time, to develop?

SM: It could be. It was also that Stalin was not, at that time, was not antisemitic yet. It was later that he changed. The plot of the doctors and so on. In 1945 I was in Moscow and saw the Jewish theater in Moscow. It was the...

GS: Yiddish theater?

SM: The best Yiddish theater I have ever seen! And after that, a short time after that they closed it. And to say, the argument was they closed it that there was because there were not enough interest. You couldn't get tickets to the, you had to buy tickets in two, three, four, five months in advance!

GS: This was in '45.

SM: Was in '45. And it was in Yiddish, and very often you saw, I remember once sitting, near me was sitting a young lady, and each time when people were laughing used to say to her mother, "Mommy what did they say?" She didn't understand the Yiddish, the language, but still she came to, to...

GS: The theater was popular.

SM: To see. And to say after that, that they closed it because there was not enough interest, this happened later. But at that time when I was, in forty-, until '45 I did not see antisemitism. [tape off then on]

GS: How much did you know of what was happening, when you were in the area of the Urals, about the persecution and killing of Jews in the west?

SM: We didn't know anything.

GS: Nothing.

SM: Nothing. As a matter of fact, when I came to Minsk, I remember talking to a neighbor of my sister's, and he said, "What, at this time does a Jew come from Ural mountains to Minsk?" And I said, "Why? What?" He said, "The Germans are close by." This was...

GS: About...

SM: They heard already...

GS: '41 or '42...

SM: That something, yeah, they heard that something funny is going on, while in the Ural mountains you know nothing, you heard nothing. And you couldn't read it from the papers, because the paper didn't say anything.

GS: This is what we have heard about most of the Soviet, people in the Soviet Union were uninformed completely about what was happening in the world outside. Except in the eastern...

SM: No, we did read...

GS: I mean in the western...

SM: But was...

GS: Portions.

SM: Yeah, we did read what, that France is being occupied, and so on and forth. But what is happening to the Jews, nothing.

GS: There was no word.

SM: No word.

GS: When did you first learn of what happened in the camps? After the war?

SM: Oh, about the various camps, this I heard after the war, in, in, in Minsk, or at all in White Russia there was immediately, the solution was on hand. In other way we knew that the people are being killed. We knew that the people, the Jews are being killed.

GS: You had seen this when you were in the ghetto I guess.

SM: Yes.

GS: Yes.

SM: In other words, they didn't kill, they killed in the ghetto too, but...

GS: They were taken away, and...

SM: They were taking out, and not far away we heard even when there will be killings, because we knew that they are digging graves. Still there was no, no, nothing to do. Was a question, where to run, what to do? Later, we wondered, why did we sit so long when we saw, hey, that we could have simply gone into the forest.

GS: Well you had to learn that that was a possibility.

SM: Yes.

GS: Was there any, message brought from other places? Did you hear of what was happening in any other towns?

SM: Yes. This we did, because occasionally some were coming to Minsk from a neighboring town where all Jews were killed, and the remaining were escaping, came to Minsk. So we knew that, this is why also we did what we were done, because we have seen sooner or later the whole ghetto will be destroyed. And we have to get away. Otherwise we'll be, initially we still hoped, hey, maybe the Russian army will push back and so on. But after, after a year, year-and-a-half, we saw that there is no hope...

GS: Wasn't happening.

SM: Was no hope in it. And we decided to try it in a different way.

GS: You had no news of what was happening in a place like Kiev, Kiev, the slaughter at Babi Yar, and,...

SM: No, Babi Yar I heard of after the war. I knew that they, I can, I could imagine what happened, because we know what the, how the Ukrainians behaved in our place. But was with Babi Yar was also in Minsk. There were more people killed in Minsk than in Babi Yar. In Minsk were killed 120,000 Jews!

GS: So you didn't need to have any other...

SM: No, no.

GS: Examples to know that the partisans was the only way to choose, to exist.

SM: Right.

GS: Is there anything else that you feel you would want to mention that I haven't asked you about? Just let me touch on one other thing. There was never any effort to enlist you or other partisans in the Soviet army, was there?

SM: No, the, after the war. When the, when I, when the Russian army has taken, came to the place which was near Bialystok, was already '44, and then the war was practically, practically won already. [noise in background; tape off then on]

GS: Do you have any feeling you would be willing to share as to how, why, you survived, some terribly dangerous, awful experiences? Do you feel that, did your religious faith answer in any way, or do you have any other feelings about your survival?

SM: Yes, simply a strong will to live. We tried to do whatever possible, whatever we could, to survive. From standing guard in ghetto to building all kinds of places to hide. Not to be passive and say, "Somebody else will help us." No, we have to do something else. There is a certain amount of luck also involved. But definitely you cannot be passive. You have to be active, and to do something in order to survive. And those who did not do, who tried only to rely on faith, did not survive.

GS: Your youth and your general good health put you in a good position to act upon these feelings.

SM: Definitely this helped. Definitely helped.

GS: And yet there were other young, healthy people who did not act. Was it out of fear, do you think, that they were unable to participate in the way you did?

SM: Very often people did not act because, family ties. Those who were with mothers, fathers, they could not leave them and run. It helped, the fact that my mother was away helped me survive. I doubt if I, if my mother were in with me in ghetto, that I would have had the courage, the strength to leave her and go. And after all to go out into the forest, and you know that minus forty degrees to be in the, to make, to have to sleep on the snow and so on, is not, is not easy.

GS: It seems almost unbelievable that you could survive those conditions.

SM: And after years, and after a certain time, we always thought, why did we wait so long, when you know it. Most people did not know that there is a way. There was not help from the neighbors, who could have helped much more than they did. For us particular, it was, particularly this was difficult, because we were in a strange environment. We didn't know the people in Minsk. We did not know, especially, the peasants around it. We did not know that it's simply possible to go there.

GS: What was your first contact with the partisans?

SM: It helped through my brother-in-law, who was a fighter all his life. And he started to go out into the villages to exchange clothes for food, bring food into the ghetto. After that I joined him. This was our first step to see, "Hey. We can go out. We can get over, away." Then was a question to try to find some kind of contacts. It happened also certain luck that a person who was a prominent Jewish Communist leader who was in the building where we lived. We discussed certain times, several times, he slept in our room. And then when he was in hiding because the Germans were looking for him, he came to us for help. And we offered immediately, without any question, sure we'll hide you. Through him we started to get certain contacts. So, it was from one part our action, and from other part the willingness of, to look, not to, not to give up hope. To look for ways out. This what happened.

GS: You have to seek it in order to find it.

SM: Yes.

GS: Some partisan groups did not accept the Jews. Some actually turned on them. But this group in the forest near Minsk had Jewish people working with them and accepted you.

SM: There were many groups which accepted. Obviously, if they wanted, they could have saved many more Jews. If there were some kind of a action to try to save Jews, Jews could have been saved, because many simply did not know where to go, what to do. Not many, *most* of the people. Had the Russian partisans be more interested in saving Jews, they could have saved much more, many more. They did not actually do anything to save, but they did not refuse, most of them did not refuse when somebody came to them.

GS: Whereas the Polish partisans, by contrast, did turn away.

SM: Oh, these Polish partisans we were always fighting. I participated in one case in disarming Polish partisans, because they were interested more in fighting us than in fighting Germans. I never heard about Polish partisans fighting Germans, but I know they were killing Jews.

GS: Well, I want to thank you very much. And I realize it's *Dr. Makower*, as you're addressed. I know it hasn't been easy to draw on these old memories, but what you've told I think will be very valuable to people who come to study seriously what the war years did to the Jewish people. And it will be passed on from one generation to the next. On behalf of the Gratz Archive I want to thank you.