

So why don't we begin with you telling me when and where you were born. I was born in Kovno, October 7, 1938. Kovno, Lithuania.

And tell me your earliest recollections about Kovno itself. What are some of the snippets that you remember?

Actually, I really don't remember anything before we were sent to the ghetto. I was 2 and 1/2 years old when we entered the ghetto, so basically what I remember is just being in the ghetto in the room mostly.

Do you remember actually going to the ghetto?

No, I don't.

So tell me what you remember from being in the room in the ghetto.

Well, I remember just one room where my parents-- my mother, father, and my grandmother-- lived in this one room. I remember a little table in the middle with a cloth hanging over it and I would sit under it most of the time because I was afraid. I knew that Germans were always searching for children, so I would basically just sit under there and sometimes draw pictures, but that was it. That was my place of hiding unless someone were literally coming in to look for children then there were other hiding places that I would have to go to.

But that's really all I remember, is just the room because I wasn't really allowed-- At the beginning my father said they would let me outside and I would have to stand right near the door. But after that I had to remain in the room because they were always searching for children to kill children. So that's pretty much-- I know I had a crib which eventually they got rid of because again that would have been a sign that a child was living in that house. That's pretty much it.

Do you remember being taught to be quiet and to stay under the table? Can you tell me about that?

I wasn't taught to stay under the table, I would just do it myself. I just felt comfortable, a little more secure there. There were times when I had to hide places and my parents would of course tell me to be very quiet and not to move. But as far as the table itself, I think it was just my own little refuge. Or sometimes even under the bed.

And you already had a fear of Germans. Tell me a little more about that.

Yes, I do. I remember that. It's interesting, because I remember as I said I would sit under the table. And I really didn't have any toys but a paper and pencil and I would draw pictures and it was always about soldiers, Germans, and the Jews fighting. I remember drawing pictures of a house--

This one is just amazing because it has always stayed with me-- I drew a picture of a house with a chimney and that I would stuff Hitler inside that chimney and that he would suffocate and die. And it's only recently I even thought about my God how symbolic the chimney was. Obviously I had no idea, I just knew the house had a chimney, but it's just amazing. But I did know. I understood the risk that was involved for me if I was not quiet or if I would move if I was told not to and so on. I definitely knew the danger. I was aware of that.

So you remember knowing who Adolf Hitler was.

Yes, I knew about Hitler. I knew the name Hitler and that he was a bad guy. I definitely knew that because again with that picture with the chimney I wanted him. I knew he meant, I guess, the leader, I suppose or the important one that I felt that he deserved to die.

Do you remember anything about being cold or being hungry or anything like that?

Yes, definitely. Definitely, I remember that. There was one time specifically, actually it was towards the end. In March of '44, the Germans had a major search for children they called the Kinder Aktion. And my parents had to hide me. And

we went underneath the stairway. Where we lived, there was a second floor, and we--

I'm really sorry about that.

OK, you were talking about the Kinder Aktion.

Yes. So we hid underneath the stairway. My parents had a cousin of mine place a mattress to camouflage the opening, and we stayed there for two days and two nights. And it was in March and it was very, very cold. The house was just made out of wood, and you could see through the cracks the outdoors.

And I remember being very, very cold, hungry. I had a cold. I was coughing and I remember having to try to suffocate the cold. I knew that if I would cough out they would hear me because I can still remember the sound of the Nazi soldiers walking up the stairs, you know the boots, and hearing people screaming outside. And so I definitely it was the fear and the hunger and the cold and that I definitely remember. There was something that just never left me. Besides being hungry, of course, in between. The whole time in the ghetto there was very little food.

Going back to near the beginning of the ghetto, so this is when you were littler, the Great Aktion, do you remember anything about that?

Actually, I don't. My father has described it to me. Interestingly, I might add that he mentioned that the day when everybody had to line up in front of the Nazi and he pointed people to go to the left and to the right, and my father noticed that the people that were being sent to the left were the disabled the old and the children. So when it was our turn and apparently he pointed to the left my father just grabbed me as we were walking together and just pushed our way into the right side, and that's why I survived or I survived certainly as a child the Aktion. But I don't remember that because I had just turned three.

Tell me about the Great Aktion from what you've learned from your father.

At that particular day?

Yes, that particular day.

Well, as he told me, he said it was early in the morning October 28, 1941. I had turned three October 7th as a matter of fact. And he said that trucks with loudspeakers drove through the ghetto and told everyone to leave their home, that every person had to leave and assemble on a place. And then that we had to line up in rows of eight, I believe, and march in front of this Nazi who sat on a chair and pointed to people to go to the left or to the right.

And he said that, as I pointed out, my father of course became aware that the people to the left he just had this feeling something was wrong why there were all these elderly and the small children and sick people were being sent to the left, he just yanked us to the right. And the next day we found out that the people who were sent to the left were killed. And there were about 10,000 people who were killed that day. So this is--

Tell me instances of you being hidden just when the Germans did come in to your--

There was one instance, this was before the Kinder Aktion, when a neighbor came yelling, quick, hide her, hide her-- people would watch out for one another-- and that a Nazi was coming into the house. So my parents had already removed the crib that I had been in and we just had one bed. So they rolled me up in the bedding like a sausage. I was inside of that and they rolled me against-- placed me I should say-- against the wall so it looked like the back of a sofa if you can visualize that.

But they placed me in there and they told me to be very quiet and not to move. And I remember feeling that I was suffocating. I couldn't breathe. And yet I knew I wasn't supposed to move because otherwise they'd find me and that meant death. So that was a very significant event that I remember.

The other one, of course, was underneath the steps. Another episode is eventually when I was smuggled out of the ghetto, but everything in between is pretty much it's sort of like snapshots. A couple that really stand out and everything else I just don't recall that well.

Tell me again about under the stairs during the Kinder Aktion.

Well, we went into hiding under the stairs that were-- It was an opening. The house had two stories and we were right underneath the stairs. A mattress was placed against it to camouflage us. My parents and I were there. My grandmother had already passed away. And we stayed there for two days and two nights. And it was very cold. It was in March, the end of March. I had a very bad cough. I remember how I was trying not to cough so that I wouldn't be heard because we could hear everything that was going on and we obviously realized that they could hear us.

I remember hearing the noise, the sound of the boots of the marching soldiers running up and down the steps over our heads. Being very hungry and cold and afraid. That was my memories.

Your parents were in there with you.

Excuse me?

Were your parents in there?

Yes, they were with me. They were with me.

Do you remember anything else right after that when you came out after the Kinder Aktion.

No, I really don't. No after that particular day I remember that within three weeks from that event I was smuggled out of the ghetto. My parents decided to smuggle me out and they knew that I would be staying with a Christian family. And interestingly, even though I was born in Lithuania I did not speak Lithuanian. We spoke Yiddish at home. was 2 and 1/2 and I entered the ghetto, so obviously my vocabulary wasn't very extensive. But in the house we spoke Yiddish.

So now they had to basically brainwash me that I was Christian, that I was Lithuanian, and we had three weeks to teach me Lithuanian and to again to teach me that I was Christian and--

So as if you haven't already told me anything about the escape three weeks after, just tell me about that.

OK. Right after the Kinder Aktion, my parents realized that in order for me to survive they would have to get me out of the ghetto, that luck would run out sooner or later. And so they were able to get in touch with someone, a Christian who's actually a colleague of my father. My father was a teacher before the war and so was this gentleman. But he was a Christian. He was a teacher of Lithuanian school.

My father was a teacher at a Jewish school, but they used to meet. And he was able to get a note to him to ask him if he would take me, if he would save my life. And he responded that he would he liked my father and he would do it for him. So now my parents had to make arrangements-- you just don't walk out of the ghetto-- how to get me out. So they decided to use a potato sack and to put me in that bag and then when my mother would go to work with the women, you know, they had to file out of the ghetto to go to work, she would carry me out that way.

They planned on a special day when they knew that there were different guards in this particular one was bribed. He was a little better than the others, and arrangements had been made so I had about three weeks to learn Lithuanian because I only spoke Yiddish at home. And my parents had to basically brainwash me to teach me that I was to be Christian and that I would never admit that I was Jewish. And they gave me a new name, My Yiddish name was Etta or Ettaleh, and they called me Elenitcha. And as I said, I had to learn Lithuanian.

And so when the day arrived-- Oh, and also I had practiced. They would practice with me to sit in that bag without moving while my mother would carry me around in the room. So then when the day arrived and I had to be carried out,

I just remember my mother taking that risk, obviously, and she carried me out and we met the Lithuanian. She got out, removed her yellow star because so she would look Lithuanian and she'd appear that way, and took off my star-- we all were stars in the ghetto-- and then she handed me over to this woman.

I remember saying goodbye. I'm sorry. Being a mother myself, I just wonder how hard it was for her realizing she'd never see me again. I'm sorry. And then I was taken away. My mother went back, put back her star and went back into the line with the women and to work. And that was in April when she smuggled me out, and then in July the ghetto was liquidated and sent off to camps, to the concentration camps.

What about the family that you lived with? What happened to you after that?

Oh, well basically I was with them. They had eight children. Some were already grown. This teacher was quite a bit older than my father. There were some young ones. There was a couple of teenagers in the house. And I remember one episode when this boy would tease me that I'm Jewish and I remember saying, no, I'm not. I think I was treated pretty well. I don't have any recollections really. I just remember that I know--

Well, there was one time when the sirens were going and they went into hiding and there were afraid to take me with them into the hiding place because the neighbors would know then. I mean, I was kept inside, you know, so they left me in the house all by myself while they all went to hide. And then another time--

Actually, I was in that house for three months and then they had to move me to the country. This gentleman, his name was Mr. Lazowska, Jonas Lazowska, had a sister in the country. And they placed me there because he was afraid that it was too dangerous to keep me in the house, that neighbors might talk and children, other children, friends of the children that I was with. So then I spent three months on a farm. But I just remember be sleeping in a bed with two other kids.

But nothing major really or eventful that occurred at that point until finally when my father came to get me. And when he arrived I can still remember I was sitting at a table drawing pictures with the other children. And this was on the farm. And he came up and he said, you know who I am? And I looked at him and then I looked down. I was afraid to admit because I'd been taught not to admit anything, you know, that I was Jewish and so on. So I was just afraid.

So then later, he took me aside and took me outside we went for a walk and he says, do you remember grandmother so-and-so? And of course I said, yes. And you know then I-- So I did recognize him, but I was still afraid to say anything. I was 5 and 1/2. So I was well taught.

OK, let's cut for just a second.

So after you were smuggled out of the ghetto, what happened to your parents?

Well, my parents were still in the ghetto. And then what I understand July, the middle of July of 1944 the ghetto was liquidated and they transported everyone to concentration camps. They placed them on cattle trains and my parents, apparently during that time when they were traveling, they talked about maybe one of them should jump off the train and just take a chance that maybe one parent would survive so that I would have a parent. And my mother was afraid to jump, so my father said, OK he'll do it.

And so he jumped off the train from that little opening, it was just a little window, while the train was moving and it was still in Lithuanian territory. He jumped, and of course fell, got hurt. He must have lost consciousness, he said, because when he woke up there was somebody standing there, a railroad worker who was going to take him to the Gestapo. He said he didn't believe, you know, he says, where are your papers? My father didn't have anything, so on. So my father managed to run away from him and my father survived basically by hiding in the woods and on farms and that's how he survived the war.

My mother, on the other hand, went on to the concentration camp, which was too tough. And that's where she was for the remainder of the war.

OK, let's cut.