

Four. In the ghetto, what about books?

We hid many books when we moved into the ghetto. And in the very beginning of the ghetto, I was a very avid reader, and I read voraciously. I read Hebrew books, I read Yiddish books, I read Russian books, Lithuanian books. And we got quite-- I got quite a education in reading. Because in the very beginning, there was nothing to do so we read books and played cards as children.

Were books forbidden in the ghetto?

Yes, they were forbidden. But we did bring in books, because the inner life of the ghetto was really run by the Jewish ghetto police rather than the Germans. The Germans left up most of the administration of the ghetto to the Jewish people themselves. They just-- they actually had decrees, and the Judenrat used to execute the decrees. The ghetto police used to keep order in the ghetto. But otherwise, all the special actions took place, the Germans didn't frequent the ghetto that much inside.

And were the ghetto police pretty much good guys?

As a rule, the Kovno Ghetto police were reasonably decent people. Some of them were bad, but I cannot recollect any atrocities having been committed by the ghetto police in Kovno.

And early in the ghetto, were the valuables taken away?

The valuables were taken away. And the Germans actually put in so much fear in us, they said that if we don't turn in the valuables, they have special dogs and special equipment to sniff out the valuables. And one day, we had to return the valuables. They put up tables, and people actually went and gave all their valuables away. I know we did. Some people who didn't believe them probably didn't turn everything in, but the fear was so great and the belief that they can sniff everything out was so proper, that people turned them out.

And did you do any organizing for food, any trading, any smuggling?

Yes, we did a lot of trading for food with the Lithuanian peasants. My father had a tremendous amount of very good clothing, suits, shirts, and whatnot, and we traded it for food with the peasants for quite a while.

Do you remember how you did it, where you went and--

We actually traded it by going to the fence. And they made holes in the fence, and you used to give them goods and they used to give back potatoes and turnips and bacon and whatnot.

And so, in terms of your health, were you-- did you have enough food?

The Kovno Ghetto, I don't believe that people actually starved. We didn't have any luxurious food, but we had enough of potatoes, legumes, and food of that nature that people had enough to sustain themselves. The Kovno Ghetto did not have the mass starvation, which places like Lodz or Warsaw had.

And what about celebrations? Did you have religious--

We managed to celebrate our holidays. We were never-- my family was never very religious. So religion as such never played a big role, but we celebrated holidays in a traditional way. And that, people still managed, somehow, to continue.

And how did you-- were you able to cook special things?

Well, the celebrations were really defined by a little bit more food than maybe-- food which was a little bit more special.

Other things to do with your work, you worked on the children's brigade at a farm once?

I worked on the children's brigade. The name of the farm was [? Marva, ?] and my father was actually the foreman of that brigade. And we used to be taken by truck to the farm, and we used to weed gardens, the tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbage, potatoes, and whatnot.

And that was a reasonably good place to work, because while you were doing it you had enough food. The people who oversaw us were not the Germans. They were actually farmers themselves who essentially contracted us to work for them, and they paid the Germans certain monies.

And so did you eat food while you were--

Yes, yes. We could-- we ate food. We eat vegetables, and also, we managed to have the Lithuanians cook some cooked food for us for exchanging things.

One of the-- I was very enterprising at that time, and the peasants liked the very, very colorful kerchiefs. So I used to make kerchiefs. I used to take white bed sheets, cut them up into squares, and I got hold of some paint. I used to make templates and make multicolored kerchiefs, and that was a means of changing it for food.

And you did also some work with making valises?

When people started to be resettled, they didn't know really that they were going to be resettled to a certain death. So all of a sudden, people needed suitcases, valises, and they were not available. So I have-- when I worked in the woodworking shops, I used to make valises out of plywood, put together four pieces of plywood, put together two backs, sew it at a certain place to make a lead. And I got hold, I remember, of hundreds of feet of piano hinge. I don't even remember where I got it. And I used to hinge them and make valises and sell them.

Also, one of the items which became very important were flashlights. Before the war, in Lithuania, the flashlights were sheet metal, a round flashlight, very similar to the ones we have here. The Germans didn't have round batteries. Their batteries were square. So adopting the old Lithuanian flashlights to a method which accepts the new batteries became a very lucrative business for me, and I used to do that.

Were you assigned to do it?

No, no, no. That was very, very quiet. That was clandestine work.

And so who did you sell to?

To the people in the ghetto. It was a tremendous-- bartering was the-- whatever you sold, you didn't sell for money. You bartered, item A for item B-- bread for flashlights, butter for something else. This is how things went on.

Also, combs were not available. So I used to make combs out of wood. Because when I worked in the workshops, I had access to machinery and to tools.

And something about blowing fuses?

Yeah, well, due to the fact that all the houses were overloaded and they were never really designed for the amount of people which lived in them, electricity was very scarce. And one of the items for boiling water we used to make immersion heaters, which was nothing else but two pieces of metal, and you separate them with an insulator, and you hang a cord on it. And if you have a tiny amount of salt or sodium in the water, you create electrolytic action, which essentially brings the water to a boil. And that became another item which I used to make.

And I figured, if I blow fuses in the houses, they'll call me to fix it. So I used to blow fuses. I had a little gadget which made shorts. And for fixing, I used to get bread, butter, potatoes.

OK. What about hiding? Did you ever hide?

Yeah, we had a lot of places, including ours. We had the hiding place, which was known in Yiddish as a [YIDDISH]. And we had one, too. And whenever things got to be very tense, we used to hide over there. In retrospect, under closer scrutiny, it would have been discovered very easily.

Describe it to me.

I think we had a-- essentially, one of the rooms, I think, or in the shed or something, was made a false wall, and you could open it up and go in. And that used to connect, somehow, to the basement. And we had over there, we made banks out of wood, and we could stay there for a while. I think we made use of it a couple times.

I think we're almost-- we're close to running out. The hanging?

That I remember very vividly, the hanging of Meck. That was-- I don't remember the date, but I remember that we all had to gather. And I saw them building up a scaffold-- or the scaffold--

[INAUDIBLE].

Toward the end, did the ghetto change and--

The ghetto became, really, a concentration camp. Even though physically it still looked like the ghetto, but as far as the German administration, it was run as a concentration camp already.

And what defined that?

I think what happened-- the SS, I think, took over the administration of the ghetto, and the whole atmosphere changed drastically.

In what ways did it change?

Number one, prior to that, they deported many people. The ghetto became very small. And I think that they sent people out to Estonia, to Latvia, and elsewhere very often. And eventually, it became really a tiny-- a very-- I don't remember how many thousands of people stayed, but it was a far cry from how we started.

How did you feel as it got smaller and smaller?

We felt impending doom. But we always felt impending doom. We never felt-- fear was an emotion which didn't go away from me for four years. So it was more fear, more uncertainty.

And so then at the end, the Kinder Aktion, you don't--

I think that I was tall enough and big enough to have really weathered the Kinder Aktion. But I cannot remember any minute details, because by that time, I was already I think about 15 years old. I was rather tall for my age. And I've worked in the shops. And at that time, I already worked outside of the ghetto.

So you were just outside--

I was outside of that, because I remember I used to go to work on the bus depot to fix buses, all the woodwork.

So then after that, that was in March--

1944.

And then?

By June, I think it was just about the summer of 1944 when the Soviets started approaching Lithuania. And the German decision was to quote, unquote, "evacuate us." And this--

Describe it to me.

As far as I know, we knew that the ghetto is going to be liquidated, and we had to appear at a certain place just with whatever we could carry on us. And we were put into freight cars. And they close the freight cars, and we started traveling.

Was the ghetto burning when you left, or no?

I remember the burning of a hospital. I don't remember exactly what happened when we left.

Tell me about the burning of the hospital.

To the best of my recollection, they just closed up the hospital. They put the hospital on fire, and they burnt everybody inside, doctors, nurses, patients, and whatnot.

And how did you see it? How did you--

Oh, that you could see. But I cannot put it chronologically at a specific time. I don't remember.

And other personal memories that you have of that time, like mischiefs that you got into, or girls that you sneaked off to see? Were there any incidents?

I was too young and too hungry that that particular aspect of life did not really come up.

What about mischief that you got into?

I don't think I got into any mischief because we were very busy trying to survive.

Any other recollections that you can think of from that time period that I haven't asked you about?

Well, one of the things I can remember, which is rather important, most certainly in my later life, is in the ghetto there was a person who used to be a mathematics professor before the war. And he insisted that I study math with him. Of course, for free, because that was going to give him some sense of reality. And he told me, if you survive, you'll use it. And if you don't survive, then it's unimportant.

I basically had a good aptitude for math. And when I was at the end of the ghetto, I was proficient in math to actually college level. I was one of the few people who got into the concentration camp with a knowledge of differential calculus.

When did you-- how did he teach you?

Oh, just-- the socialization inside of the ghetto was there. People spoke to people. I mean, there was no separation of people, because after you came from work, people just congregated together. And that may have been one of the reasons why there were very few, if any, suicides in the ghetto, because there was always a community spirit. And people didn't feel singled out in their misery.

So in general, people helped each other.

People helped each other and people supported each other. And due to the fact that there was a cohesive community, people did not feel abandoned, because whatever happened happened to a group rather than to individuals.

OK. And what about-- do you remember having to wear the yellow star?

Oh, yeah. That's the-- I had to wear two yellow stars, one on the front, one in the back. That started in the very beginning after the German occupation. And that also became a rather interesting business of mine, because I used to make yellow stars out of plywood and connect the front and the rear with a string so people could put it over the back and the front.

OK. Thank you. Let's cut.