Interviewed (early May 97) by Sandra W. Bradley

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TIMECODE NOTES:

SB: Interview with Abraham Rodstein.

A--B--R--A--H--A--M, R--O--D--S--T--E--I--N. Sound roll 16. Camera roll number 31 continued.

(Cut)

C: 32, marker 1.

(Cut)

C: Marker 2.

SB: Um, when you--where you born.

AR: I was born in Sholietah, Lithuania in October 16, 1928.

SB: Tell me a little bit about your childhood.AR: My father was a successful business person. We had a movie house. We had a cafe and a bakery. And I--we lived in a very nice part of town. I was an only child--very pampered. I had uh--I caretaker/nanny and uh my mother

never worked. We had a lot of help in the house. We lived very affluent.

SB: And tell me how you remembered it as things changed?

AR: In 1940, the Russians--the Soviets occupied Lithua-

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nia. One morning we work up and saw the Russian army in charge of the country and a lot of things changed then. The took away my father's business made him an employee in his own business. And after a very short time, we realized that if we don't move out of the town, they would eventually arrest my father. This that the Soviets and send him off to Siberia. In order to prevent or delay that occurrence we moved to Kovno in about the fall of 1940 and our life became changed because my father got a job someplace. We had enough money from before so economically we were rather well

off. But everything changed. I uh started going to public school where I always went to private school. I also had to become a Pioneer. This could be learned to a boy scout. I wore this white shirt and a red tie and belonged to Communist Youth Organization because that was politically correct. And the uh school I went to was not a private school anymore, as I said before, it was public school. And the whole life became on a different level. In order to be politically correct, the Young Pioneers, they sent everybody in the summer to camp in summer of 1941 and so happens that the camp they sent us was Palanga which was a seaside resort where I use to go every year with my mother in very very luxurious way and here they put me into big tents with many people sharing bathrooms and I wasn't use to anything like that. So at the age of 12, I figured I had to try to escape. And I figured the only way to escape is to some how fool them into that I had Appen-dicitis attack and maybe they'll send me home. That I

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did and it so happens that a surgeon in the camp was somebody who knew me from childhood. Even though he realized that I am faking it, he managed to send me home. That was in the summer of 1941, just a few weeks before the war started. That may have saved my life because when the Germans overrun that part of Lithuania, which was very close to Germany--I believe that most of the children in that camp were destroyed.

SB: Tell me about the actually start of the war: what you saw, what you heard.

AR: In about the summer of 1941, things were very tense but the Russians were still in full control and we really didn't know much. One morning, we heard all kinds of gunfire, bombs and guns and maybe by the next day, the Germans occupied Lithuania. It was not--there was very little resistance from the Lithuanians against the Germans: 'A' because the Russians were too strong, 'B' because the Lithuanians were very much pro-German and they welcome it.

SB: Um, what other changes? Did--did you notice any changes just before or just after the Germans came in, in terms of Lithuanians?

AR: After the Germans came in, and even before they

fully came in, the Lithuanians started to commit tre-
mendous atrocities. Actually cutting off Jews heads
and putting them on fences. And they were horrendous

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to such a point that when the Germans came, we found a
relief because they stopped that indiscriminate slaugh-
ter.

SB: Did you witness any of those?

AR: I personally did not witness it but I had people--I
spoke to people who did witness it. And so at your age
how did you feel in general then.

SB: And so at your age how did you feel in general
then.

AR: Started being afraid. That became the primary uh
modus to operate--fear. Fear, uncertainty--we did

never knew what was going to happen.

SB: And so then the decree went out for the ghetto to be formed? Tell me about yours.

AR: Did, uh, final time later, the decree came out that all Jews have to move into the ghetto. And it was very funny because they actually permitted you to trade houses with Lithuanians who lived in that part of town. The house which I lived in, belonged to a cousin of my father's. It was a very very beautiful house. So it was very easy to get a reasonably nice in the ghetto in exchange. And that took place and we actually moved into a house in the ghetto and those people who owned that house occupied the house we lived in.

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SB: Was that an even trade?

AR: No it wasn't an even trade but it was the best we could do.

SB: Do you actually remember moving in? Do you remember?

AR: Oh yes.

SB: Tell me h--what you took.

AR: We could--they did not restrict us from taking any belongings but due to the fact that the new place was much smaller and the living space was allocated we wound up one or more families per room not per--not--not even per house. So you really took as little as you had to--just, I mean, just bare necessities. It immediately became obvious, electricity wasn't sufficient for all these people, some of the reconditions were insufficient and the first thing people did is build and out house.

SB: And the actually move, how did you get there?

AR: I do not recollect.

SB: Um, we have only a little bit. Tell--why don't you describe to me the living space. As you

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AR: As I remember it, my mother, father, and myself plus two or more people got one room only and we had to make bunks in order to accommodate everybody. And there was--the kitchen--there was maybe one kitchen--and you wound up having to cook over there maybe for 20 or 30 people. So I remember that we made little stoves out of sheet metal and we use to make--and--and we use to be able cook our kindling wood. That I remember very vividly. And so every room, more or less, had their own cooking facilities.

SB: What about heating?

AR: In the very beginning, there was enough heat. That particularly--that--there was a stove I think in every room. And that was used for heating and also the cooking facilities gave out enough heat and literally favorably there were many people in one room, it wasn't that cold. But that--that was of course in the summer

and the fall. When the winter came, things became very bad and we started burning furniture.

SB: We're--I think we're just about to run out.

C: Camera roll 33, mark 3.

SB: Um, in the early days of the ghetto, uh were you aware of actions before the big action?AR: Yeah, they always had some thing going on.

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SB: Tell--tell me what you remember of that.

AR: I think they had small actions. The rounded up people--they round people up and they use to send them away to the ghetto supposedly for--to work camps--some Estonia--some elsewhere.

SB: And tell me about the Big Action.

AR: The Big Action, that I can remember. It was in Oct--I think--it was October 28th. I think it was '43 if I'm not mistaken or--

SB: '41.

AR: '41 okay so I was wrong with the year. Everybody supposedly suppose to have been a they--they did it in the guise of a census. And people were suppose to all gather early in the morning in the place called the Macratu Place. And I remember very vividly it was a great cold, drizzly day and we went to this week open field in the morning. And they had this table set up and this is where they started to make the selections; to the right and to the left. Whoever went to the right was saved for the moment. Whoever went to the left was resettled out of the ghetto.

SB: What happened to your family that day?AR: We managed to stay intact. One of the reasons, we stayed

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intact, I believe, we had an inkling that the ghetto police is not going to be touched. The house we lived in was also occupied by a high ranking person from the ghetto police. His name was Gudinski. And the ghetto police was identified to be an arm band which had a--I think a Jewish star and some stamping. I was a very good craftsman and I actually stole, a night, this arm band of his and I copied it with uh oil paint on a piece of canvas and my father put it on. And I figure it then that nobody is going to look at it that closely so if I make it appear correct, it is going to be correct. And that was one of the reasons which we might have been saved. I don't know.

SB: Did your father wear that the whole time when you walked to the place or I mean was he scared?

AR: He was scared just put it on everyplace because we were scared of the ghetto police.

SB: You were scared that you would get discovered.

AR: That's right. The ghetto police, not everybody was bad but not everybody was good. As a rule the ghetto

police were not terrible but we really didn't know whom we could trust. And even the person who lived in the same house where we did, I really didn't--we really didn't know if we an trust him. And you have to realize that when an action like that takes place, chaos, shouting, yelling, shoving and pushing is one of the

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main ingredients by which the Germans were able to make people behave a certain way. And that chaos which took place also meant that minute details are overlooked. I didn't know it then but I feel this is what must have taken place.

SB: Tell me how you stole his arm band.

AR: Oh it's very simple. They--his coat was hanging in uh in a kinda vestibule.

SB: Did he have many of them or did he have--

AR: I really remember. All I--I remember it was a leather coat and that the arm band was pinned round on the sleeve.

SB: And how--do you remember how long you had it and how long you borrowed it. What you weren't quick with it.

AR: I did it over night.

SB: Um, and tell me what you knew of what happened to the people who went to the left.

AR: As far as we knew, those people were sent to work in Estonia. Which was not the ghetto anymore but it was the concentration camp type situation and the conditions were very harsh and many people perished.

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And they must have also taken some people to the 9th Fort and destroyed them. I don't remember the details. I can not recollect.SB: And you didn't know about it at the time. And you didn't see them going?

AR: No, you really didn't see anybody going. You just uh were separated away and eventually that evening came we went back to uh our place where we lived.

SB: And did you from where you lived, could you hear machine guns?

AR: I don't believe so, no. I didn't. If they did machine gun, they didn't do it right there and then.

SB: And what about the--your father somehow, with that railroad, and sorted clothes or something?

AR: That was, at the previous time, we use to wind up working in Kovno on the main railroad. And Lithuania was a place where they use to bring German Jews and Austrian Jews to be liquidated at the 9th Fort and we use to do slave labor on the railroad. And we servance a uh whole contingent of German Jews, who came in, and they were brought in in regular cars--not in cattle cars. The Germans tried to maintain that lie all the way because they figure it's probably much easier to deal with the people this way. When those people came and we saw them, we tried to tell them that--try to

blend in amongst us. We have no idea what's going to

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happen tomorrow but today this seemed to be safe. And if they would have blend in amongst us they could have gone back to the ghetto at night and uh be safe for the moment. The German Jews were very arrogant--they didn't believe us because they really put themselves apart. The use to call us Austjewden and themselves they use to refer to as German of the Hebraic persuasion. And they actually wound up being killed the same evening at the 9th Fort. And subsequently when we worked at the railroad, we use to wind up sorting out clothes because the German, very neatly, packed up and did whatever they wanted with them. And my father knew certain people from Germany or from Austria, from before the war and we actually came across clothing with the names which recognized.

SB: Back to uh how the ghetto then kind of settled down

into a routine again.

AR: Yes, the ghetto settled into a lull--into a routine and there was a lot of work being done for the Germans in the ghetto. We had shops and we also had a trade school. The trade school was designed, in order to somehow convince the Germans that if they let the trade school, the children who are going to learn the trade, they were subsequently going to provide useful labor for the German army. And the men who actually started this whole school, use to be the director or O--R--T, ORT, it was an American organization before the war, in Lithuania. His name was Olinski. And that was a

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school where they taught you how to be a Locksmith, Carpentry and other things--trades. I was lucky enough to also having gone into that trade school. When I was there, I learned how to be Locksmith. I also learned how to do very fine Carpentry and after a while, I was

good enough that I went to work in the shops, which is obviously a safer place. While I was in the shops, I did a lot of doll houses. My expertise became doll houses for higher ranking Germans; to the point they use to bring photographs of their houses. I use to scale them and build a doll house to mimic there house. Furniture, electricity inside--very very elaborate set-ups.

SB: And tell me why it was safe with you?

AR: Well, when you were in this type of a mode, you were useful. You did things. So, as long as that regime in the ghetto administration--the German regime remained as is, you felt safe. I don't know if it was safe. It's obviously--eventually it was proven it wasn't but it felt safe.

SB: Um, what about fun in the ghetto?

AR: The ghetto had an orchestra and it so happens the first violinist of the orchestra of the ghetto didn't have a bow and I gave him the bow which I had when I was a child because when I was a child besides going to regular school, I also went to music school, took the

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violin and the piano. And some how my bow and my violin wound up in the ghetto. So my violin played in the ghetto orchestra. And we had, I think, if I remember correctly, we had some theater. We tried to maintain inside the ghetto some roots of a life.

SB: Okay, we have to put another roll on.

AR: Sure.

(Cut)BS: Sound roll 17. Camera roll 34.

(Cut)

C: Mark.

SB: In the ghetto, what about books?

AR: We hid many books when we moved into the ghetto. And in the very beginning of the ghetto, I was very avid reader and I read vivaciously. I read Hebrew books. I read Yiddish books. I read Russian books;

Lithuanian books. We got quite--I--I got quite an education reading because there was nothing to do so we read books and played cards as children. Were books forbidden in the ghetto?

SB: Were books forbidden in the ghetto?

AR: Yes they were forbidden but we did bring in books

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because the inner life of the ghetto was really around by the Jewish ghetto police, rather than the Germans. The Germans lift up most of their administration of the ghetto to the Jewish people themselves. The just--they uh had actually had decrees and they Unerout use to uh execute the decrees. The ghetto police us to keep order in the ghetto but otherwise only special actions took place, the Germans didn't free from the ghetto that much inside.SB: And um were the ghetto police pretty much good guys?

AR: As the rule the Kovno ghetto police--they're reasonably decent people. Some of them were bad but I can not recollect any atrocities having been committed by the ghetto police in Kovno.

SB: And early in the ghetto, were the valuables taken?

AR: 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, the 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. So people who didn't believe them, probably didn't turn everything in but the fear was so great and the believe that they can sniff everything out was so proper that people turned them out.

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SB: And um, did you do any organizing for food? Any trading? Any smuggling?

AR: Yes, we did a lot of or--sp--uh trading for food with the Lithuanian peasants. My father had a tremendous amount of very good clothing; suits, shirts and what not. And we traded in for food with the peasants for quite a while.

SB: How--do you remember how you did it? Where you went and--

AR: We actually traded it by going to the fence and uh they made holes in the fence and we use to give them goods and they use to give the uh--back potatoes and turnips and uh bacon and what not.

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

AR: The Kovno ghetto, I don't believe 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. Kovno ghetto did not have the mass starvation which places Lodeshovarso had.

SB: And what about celebrations? Did you eh--and religious uh--?

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

SB: And how did you? He--like were you able to cook special things?

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

SB: Um, other things to do with your work, um you

worked on the children's brigade at a farm once?

AR: I worked on the children's brigade. The name of the farm was Marva and uh my father was actually the foreman of that brigade. And we use to be taken by uh truck to the farm and we use to weed uh gardens. The tomatoes, cucumber, cabbage, potatoes and what not. And that was a reasonably good place to work because while you were doing it you had enough food. The uh people who oversaw--oversaw us were not the Germans, they were actually farmers themselves who essentially contracted us to work for--for them--they paid the Germans certain monies.

SB: And so did you eat food while you were there?

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AR: Yes, yes we cou--we--we--we ate food. We ate vegetables and also we managed to uh have they uh

Lithuanians cook some cooked food for us for exchanging things. One of the uh--I was very enterprising at that time and the uh peasants liked very very colorful kerchiefs. So I use to make kerchiefs. I use to take white bed sheets, cut them up into squares and I got hold of some paint. I use to make templates and make multi-colored kerchiefs and that was a means of exchanging it for food.

SB: And um you did also some work with uh making releases?

AR: Well 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, releases and they were not available. So I have--when I worked in the woodworking shops, I use to make releases out of plywood; put together four pieces of plywood, put together two backs. Sew it at a certain place to make it lead and I got hold, I remember, of hundreds of piano hinge. I don't even remember where I got it. And I use to hinge them and make releases and sell them. Also one of the items, which became very important were flashlights. Before the war, in Lithuania, the flashlights were sheet metal around flashlights, very similar to the ones we have here. The Germans didn't have round batteries. Their batteries were square. So I doctored the old Lithuani-

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an flashlights to a metal which accepted the new bat-
teries became a very lucrative business for me and I
use to do that.

SB: You--were you assigned to do it?

AR: No no no. That was very very quite. That--that
was clandestine work.

SB: And, so who did you sell to?

AR: To the--to the people in the ghetto. It was a
tremendous--bartering was they uh--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 this went on. Also combs were not
available so I use to make combs out of wood because
when I worked in the workshops, I had access to machin-
ery and to tools.

SB: And um something about blowing fuses?

AR: Yeah, well uh due to the fact that all of the houses were overloaded and they were never really designed for the amount of people which lived in them. Electricity was very uh scarce. And one of the items for boiling water, we use to make a emersion heaters. Which was nothing else but two pieces of metal and you put--you separate them with an insulator and you hang your cord on it and if you had 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 use to make and I figured that if I blow fuses in houses they'll call me to fix it. So I use to blow fuses so I use to--how do you say I little judge it which made shorts and for fixing it, I use to get bread, butter and potatoes.

SB: And what about hiding? Did you ever hide?

AR: Yeah we had a uh a lot of places including ours we had the hiding place which was known in Yiddish as a Melena and we had one too. And when ever things got very um tense, we use to hide over there. In retrospect, under closer scrutiny, it would have been discovered very easily.

SB: Describe it to me.

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

SB: I think we're almost--we're close to running out. Um the hanging?

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AR: That I remember very vividly the hanging of Mec. That was uh, I don't remember the date, but I remember that we all had to gather and I saw them building up a scaffold. Well the scaffold was built prior to it and uh they actually put a noose around him and if I remember correctly, the actual hanging may have been done by the ghetto police rather by Germans. But of course under the German coercion.

SB: Okay.

AR: That image never forget.

SB: Okay we need to cut.

(Cut)

BS: --Rodstein. Continue on sound roll 17.

(Cut)BS: Camera roll 35 is up.

C: 35, 5 mark.

SB: Toward the end, did the ghetto change?

AR: The ghetto became really a concentration camp even though physically it looks like the ghetto but as far as the German administration it was one of the concentration camp already.

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SB: And what defined that?

AR: I think what happened to--the S.S. I think took over the administration of the uh --of the ghetto. And the whole atmosphere changed drastically.

SB: In what ways did it change?

AR: Number 1, the uh--the dep--prior to that they deported many people, the ghetto became very small and it--I think that they sent people out to Estonia, to Latvia and elsewhere were very often and eventually it

became really a tight--eh uh--uh I don't remember how many thousands of people stayed but it was a far cry from how we started.

SB: How did you feel as it got smaller an smaller?AR: 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.

SB: And so then at the end, the Kinder Action you don't--you don't--

AR: I think that I was tall enough and big enough to have really bettered at the Kinder Action but I can not remember any minute details because by that time I was already about 15 years old. I was rather tall for my age and I worked in the shops. And by that time I

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already worked outside of the ghetto.

SB: You were just outside--

AR: I was outside of that because I remember I use to go to work on the bus depot to fix buses--all the wood work.

SB: So then after that--that was in March,

AR: 1944.

SB: And then--

AR: By June, I think it was just about the summer of 1944, where the Soviets started approachingLithuania and the German decision was to uh quote unquote evacuate us. Well--as far as I know, the ghetto is going to be liquidated and we had to appear at the certain place just with whatever we could carry on us and we were put into freight cars. And they closed the freight cars and we started traveling.

SB: Was the ghetto burning when you left or no?

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

SB: Tell me of the burning of the hospital.

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AR: To the best of my recollection, they just closed up the hospital, they put the hospital on fire and they burn everybody inside. Doctors, nurses, patients and what not.

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

AR: Oh, that you could see. But I can not put it chronologically in a specific time. I don't remember.

SB: And other personal memories that you have of that time like uh mischief that you got into or girls that you sneaked off to see. Were there any incidents?AR: I was too young and too hungry that that particular aspect of life did not really come up.

SB: What about mischief that you got into?

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

SB: Any other recollection that you can think of from that time period that I haven't asked you about.

AR: Well, one of the things that I can remember which was rather important which must have served me in my later life is in the ghetto, there was a person who use to be a mathematics professor before the war, and he insist that--that I studied 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, who learned some important. And I basically had a good aptitude for math and when I was at the end of the ghetto, I was proficient with math to actually college level. I was one of the few

people who had in the concentration camp, the knowledge of differential calculus.

SB: When did you--how did he teach you?

AR: Oh just uh--just in--in--in the social--socializa-tion inside of the ghetto was there. People spoke to people. I mean there was no separation of people because after you came work, people just uh caluated together. And that may have been 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 by a misery.

SB: So in general, people helped each other.

AR: 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 what ever happened, sort of happened to a group rather than to individuals.

SB: Okay, and what about--do you remember having to wear the yellow star?

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TIMECODE NOTES:

AR: Oh yeah, that--that uh I had to wear two yellow stars; one in the front and one in--in the back that tied to the very beginning after the German occupation. And that also became a rather interesting business of mine because I use to make yellow stars out of plywood and connect the front with the rear wih a--with a string so people could put it over their--over their back and the front.

SB: Okay, thank you.

Video Tape No.____ Camera Roll No. ____ Sound Roll No. ____