

KOVNO GHETTO EXHIBIT Interview w/BEREL ZISMAN page 1

Interviewed (5-7-97) by Sandra W. Bradley

Wentworth Films, Inc. 9400 Kendale Rd, Potomac, MD 20854

TIMECODE NOTES:

Bob Silverthorne: This is an interview with Berl Zisman. B--E--R--L, Z--I--S--M--A--N. Sound roll 26 at the head. Camera roll 53 at the head.

C: 53 marker 1.

Jim Ball: Hold on.

C: 53 marker 1, mark.

SB: First of all, tell me when and where you were born.

BZ: I was born in Kovno, in 19--in 1929...to a family. I had 2 brothers, an older sister. My parents was affluent. My father was a owner of a horse or course a were the second largest in Lithuania. A normal religious family in Lithuania. We lived in downtown Kovno, in Douchgutway, later we changed to Kovnogutway. Nothing special, till 1939. Then things started to change. With the war starting; the German, Polish. In 1940, the Russians marched in, confiscated the store. We were already uprooted. At one time the are got wind

that the Russians want to come in and arrest us as
Bourgeoisiers because we are rich people and wanted to
send us to Siberia. Once we got wind of it, everybody
left the house. The children were sent away to differ-
ent areas and when they came to get us, nobody was
home. I was sent away down the Namen, that was the
river there led to a town. I should go and shop for in

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the market there. I told what to do and came--came
back 3 days later. And that's what the Russians were
doing. If they came home--came a place, where they
didn't find them, forget it. They talk go down and you
didn't know when will come back. But this time we were
saved. And that was after they confiscated the store.
In the beginning they put my father as a uh worker
there. He worked there for a few months and then they
chased him out. We had a lot of uh after we run. But
you had to have some kind of an occupation. Otherwise

you were already a criminal. So my father took an occupation after being a watchman. That was the only way he could get away without working on Saturday. Later on, we saw that this wasn't the answer. We opened what we call the little restaurant in our house. We had a big apartment with a big dining room so we made a little restaurant. Actually this was a cover so you can--people can come in without doing any suspicion. And between then they did a little business on the side. If anybody strange or any stranger--anybody unknown use to come in, everybody would sh--shocked white. Nobody would say a word. And just eat a meal, get pay--pay the big and then get out. That went in 19--that was 1940. Before the war--when the war broke out. That was uh Saturday night or Sunday morning, I remember that the Sunday evening we had a meeting in our house and they had to decide. My father and a lot of friends came in the house. Should we run or should we stay and wait the Germans to come in. The--we did not know the realities that those of the--the Kundamtra

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because the Germans were in Vilna a day before than Kovno. You know, they cut off any root to run away. But even without knowing that, they decided not to run because we hated the Russians to run because they were no better than the Germans. So the decision was not to run. Those who did run unfortunately didn't make it. Uh, it was a couple months that the Germans sent us to the ghetto. The Germans came in I think it was Wednesday morning or Tuesday morning or Wednesday morning in Kovno. Um the time before went into the ghetto, they use to come into my house--our house to pray in the morning and they needed a median which called a qur--quorum--10 people. So people even from the house or from very close by, use to sneak into our house to pray. When they were in middle of praying, they saw a German officer comes in. I don't know what he knew but he came to father and looked at the--the--the are in the are gobbed with the film intelation. And all of a sudden, he comes to us said, 'Do you have a Shohanora?' Which is a uh actually the code of the Jewish Law. My father was amazed that a German officer should ask him a question like that. He gave--showed to him. He put it back in the suitcase and left. It didn't take more than 5 minutes. A whole group of German officers came in and questioned, 'Was anybody here? Did he demand anything? Did he ask for anything?' And that's when

again interrupted the players. They didn't say anything and left. A few minutes later, a few big officers, high ranking officers--exactly I don't know what the ranks were but they were higher ranking officers

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came in and told all of us to get out to the yard. We thought this is the end of it. We some tried to take off their telations--their--their clothes and its film. And it no--no--no do--don't--will--will--you should not. Don't take it off. So we thought that this is the end of course us the way we--we look. The put us in the yard, put us against the wall. Take out cameras and take pictures and told us all to get back in. This was Vermacht officers. Of course they--they--ah--our uh lives were on the line. We thought this was the end of us. This is the--one of the first experiences that I had with seeing the Germans. It didn't take long. I think uh, in the middle of the summer and everybody was

supposed to find a place and get there. They designat-
ed an area and all of the Jews had to move there.
Looking around where to find a place to--to move wasn't
easy. The Lithuanians that had to move out from that
area weren't too happy either. However, my father had
owned a building. I think a 16 family house--what we
called a Greenenbahg--the 'Green Mountain' in Kovno.
And looking for a place, he found uh a uh Lithuanian
that had a 4 family house--a 5 family house--4 families
and an attic. And he said, 'How about making an ex-
change. Here I give you a big house--16 families--a
real income house for this little hut that you had
without whatever. Without uh
eh--eh--eh--eh--eh--eh--any plumbing and that's the way
they exchanged houses. So we found a little place in
the--in--in--in ghetto. There was 4 little apartments.
Each apartment had a kitchen and a room and a little

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vestibule in front. And--and attic which was also the couple of rooms. My uncle and the family--my aunt and uncle and family took one apartment. We took another apartment and the other couple families were there and the arrangements were that I didn't know. That the--they took the apartments. That's how we moved in together.

SB: Do you remember what you took with you?

BZ: We took the bare necessities. We couldn't--we had a big apartment and Kovnogutway Katavolika. The Kovnogutway number 14. And what we uh went--was only a room--a two rooms; a room and a kitchen. So only what we did necess--the most important things that we could think of, we took along with us. Among the things that we took with us was, somehow in a we had a--a valise with wheat--namgut wheat. And my father foresaw that in case we have to stay there through Passover, he will need something to--to make--to buy back Matsa from. So he took along that valise wheat. That was among other things. Course, we took along a uh--we had a uh as a potato men, bible and uh whatever books. The most important books we took along with us and that's how we went to the ghetto.

SB: Okay we have to reload.

(Cut)

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BS: Go to camera roll 54. 54 is up.

(Cut)

C: Camera roll 54, marker 2.

JB: Mark.

C: Oops, second stix.

SB: Okay, go ahead and tell me. BZ: While we were looking a place in the ghetto. I went along once with my father. And that was what you call Slabotka. The ghetto was a Slabotka. Kovno was like a peninsula. It had two rivers on either side of the town. And--and at the end of the town the two rivers met. The one river was the Namen dead on the Valir. Slabotka was on the

other side of the Valir. That's where the Kovno ghetto was. While going there to look for a place that we had to move into the ghetto, we walked into some of the abandoned houses that Jewish people leave before and the blood that we saw in the beds; beds unmade; cribs full with blood stains--in the cribs and that was right after the Germans came in. The Lithuanians themselves made sets of pogroms. They went through Jewish houses, killing everybody--old, young, babies in the cribs. That scene with the blood in the beds and blood in the cribs--this I will never forget. And that was the Lithuanian watsum--the--the--the Lithuanian murderers that committed these things. Later, we have seen a lot

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of other atrocities but that was one of the most horrible scenes that I've ever scene even through--through--out the--the Holocaust.

SB: When you moved into the ghetto uh, were you afraid?

BZ: Fear was not the--the--the--the question. We were afraid everyti--every--every time we heard uh foot-steps. The--the--the joke was that when the Germans were coming because they--they are banging on it--the way they were walking--you could hear for--for a block away. Uh--uh--the only problem was in ghetto, in the street that we live was not paved. It was scent and uh but if you saw a German from 3 blocks away, you hid. In ghetto itself, after it got some kind of an amolity--whatever an amolity could be in ghetto. The did have rations and they did ha--have--has--has to supply the minimal of bread or whatever this the--the minimal of uh. The never trusted incapable people to man to the uh store, to watch the bakeries and so on. My father, being a very honored an trusted individual, capable businessman--they somehow favored him. I'm talking the ghetto administration and gave him an inside job. In other words, they should not have to go out everyday from the ghetto to uh--to uh work. But gave him a job, in the ghetto, because they needed him. They needed somebody to trust who should administer a uh a did--a--a--a store where bread was being divided and given out on the rations to the people. So that was my father's job most of the time; in the store and

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also in a bak--later on a bakery. That he was the, so to speak, the uh manager of the bakery to what was going on. That nothing should be stolen. Nothing should done un--unjustified.

Uh-and--and--they--they--they trusted him and he was the--the taking care of that job. So that's enabled him not to have to meet the German on the daily basis.

SB: And um what about humiliation to you father? Tell me about his...

BZ: The humiliation--once while he was in the store, behind the counter, a German came in. And through seeing my father with a beard, pulled out his sword and cut it off a half a beard. And he wanted to go further but somehow from the outside, somebody called him, so he left him like this. My father being a religious man and didn't care, you know, that he would not give in to their--so he would not even straighten out his beard. Half of it was cut off--he took a scarf, wrapped in

around his face and that's the way he wa--he was walk-
ing, till the beard grow back. But he wouldn't cut it.
Bigger humili--humiliations then beatings and--and uh
spitting in the face--that's that was uh even worse.
Yes my uh--had cousins and other family that were
beaten brutally. I remember once specific--an older
cousin. I was at that time, 11--12 years--13 years and
a cousin that was uh 19 came with boros from head to
toe. A German--if somebody else probably wouldn't have
survived. This was a young fellow, strong fellow and

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he was black and blue from head to toe. That's--that
was uh the Indania curse.

SB: Do you remember one of the early actions--the
Intelligencia Action?

BZ: That was uh in the Jewish uh calender, Marhusbin,
Ziemarhusbin--the 7th day of the month what we call

Marhusbin. That was the Big Actia. Everybody had to go out on the--on the uh--the big open field and they were selecting. Right--left--left--right. At that time, the most of them were families. The didn't take--the--the--they uh not as much breaking up families but families on one side--families on the other side. Fortunately we were selected on the right side. The--those that were selected on the left side, the pushed in to the--in the what you call the Klainagutter. The ghetto was a big eh highway or what for there it was a big highway, went through the ghetto. On one side of the highway, was a smaller part, that was called the Klainagutter. But being that the highway had to go through the ghetto, so each uh--each part was individually uh wired or--or uh fenced in. Those that selected were taken in the small ghetto and the next day, the morning, they took them to the 9th Fort and--and uh killed them. At that time I understand the uh 9,000 uh Jews I thing in the Great Actia.

SB: Do you remember that day?BZ: I remember the day vividly. It was still dark outside when we went out

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from the house. And we were standing there for hours. The day was a dismal day. It was uh--uh--uh I don't--was raining what was a cold uh damp day. And uh stayed until late in the evening and then we were sent back to the house. For my family, my uncle uh Mihnk's family--only 3 children were left on the right side--the right side; the rest of the family on the left. So these 3 children later moved into with our--with us in the 2 rooms. We had the the--the kitchen in the room and the partitions of the kitchen. These 3--these 3 slept behind the partition in the kitchen. While we meaning my--my parents and two more brothers, myself slept in one room in the other room. It means at night, the room became one bed. 12 were larger than a meter. And in the morning, they use to put it together because they wanted to make a quorum, a meeting in the house, even in ghetto. So the, every-thing was posed on the side and the 10 people used to come in and used to play down right there. Later they took away the books so there was uh they--they--they--they without the books, so we had--they--they--we had to hide whatever we wanted to--the--the--the few books that we kept, we had to hid them that God forbid shouldn't see it and

then--then--then and that was biggest crime.

SB: In the Big Action, do you remember going past the German during the selecting?

BZ: I eh--I don--it was very fleeting mom--moment. It

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was a--go this way and that way we went. We didn't
uh--it wasn't that the uh we were uh looked over for
hours. I mean it was a fleeting moment. We came in the
line. Walk to the right--we went to the right and
that's it.

SB: Did you know--had you already figured out which was
the good side?

BZ: I did not remember figuring it out at that time.
But after a while, we are already realized that it
was--it was the--we are were on the right side.

SB: Okay we have to put another roll on.

(Cut)

C: 3 marker.

SB: And in the Big Action, when you talked before to Paul, you told him that it looked like the people doing the selecting and the guarding were enjoying their job. Is that right? Laughing?

BZ: To them it was a joke. They're kidding around. Go here--go there. I was like uh with--with smiles on there faces and uh--and the biggest joke was that uh people that did not know what was right and what is wrong. People did not know what was happening. And when the people wanted to go the wrong way and they

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were laughing--they made it the biggest joke to them. They did them a favor. Some--some people asked them to go the other way because families were separated so they uh--they was a joke. Ha ha you want to go there, go ahead. They--they did them a favor. It was joke. I don't remember exactly what of the few officers there were there standing there and of course a lot of guards and uh that way they it went--in went through. Eh--SB: --and. Go ahead.

BZ: As a result of that eh Big Actia, what we called. People realized that many times they--they--there was a lot of other Actias but even before and after. That if you're not there and you survived it, you have a bet--better chance to stay surviving instead of going to a selection. So what we started doing is make hiding places; wuntas as we called. And of course not every house or every place could or was suitable so we teamed up with a neighbor across the street from us who had a little house. And uh the uh water source was a well in the yard and next to the house would be 10-12 feet away from the house was a barn. That we kept uh wood if you had any--anything to keep there. So we decided to dig up the barn, make like a--a uh bunker underneath, cover it up with what ever wood we could and cover it up with the dirt and uh dig a tunnel because once you went into that little house the vestibule had like a cold basement. I mean like it's a poured cement. That was like a basement only smaller.

It was just uh under the vestibule. So they had a trap

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door to get down to that place. The--the broke through a wall in--in--in the cement, dug a tunnel from there to the uh room that was actually underneath that barn. Now they needed any kind of supplies. The--the wall was very close by so they made it so that they took all the first around from the well, covered it up and put the well also into the bunker. Not nowhere and they were taking water from our well that we had in the backyard. By the Klay--Kinder Actia and that was already forty ehh in '44. And then in Jewish date it was 2 days the Kinder Actia. That was the 3rd and the 4th day of the month of Yessin. We were hidden there in that bunker. However a parent of one of the people of our neighbor somehow were found that somewhere else and in order to be released or he'll thought he will be released, he snitched on us so they let

should let him go. So the last--the second day of he Kinder Actia, in the late in the afternoon, all of a sudden they started banging on the wall because they already found us out. They--they wouldn't of found it unless somebody pointed a finger. And that is the one who pointed the finger at us. They took us all out and that when my father and my younger brother were taken away. Before that, when I was about 14, that was means 2 years in the ghetto, they also realized that if you have a profession or you're employed, you had a better chance of survival--at least on a day to day basis. So my father put me in the Klainerverstacten. In ghetto, I should learn a trade of Tinsmith and capable I was and picked up very fast. Within a few months, I was a

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full-fledged Tin Smith. So much so that what we were doing there was for half-houses we used to make the cans--the spray cans or milk cans. So it made it

turning the uh medal and also uh soldering. I could answer first that it's not how you holding the solder iron or you leading the solder but how you apply the acid before and that's how the solder will be. When I once went bought in a utensil finished. It was only about 2 months after I started--you know not even 2 months and I showed him that I did--I finished it--the foreman couldn't believe it. You couldn't do it. He wouldn't trust me--said he accused me that somebody else did it for me. Till he went in the shop with me and I showed him how I solder that just like a string. That convinced him yet that I did it. In a month later he made me the foreman for the whole shop. That was what I did in the ghetto after I was 14. My father were doing in that time, as I said before in the bakery. But then they were short in people to sent out for certain jobs outside of the ghetto and they didn't have enough could they send and they had to--to say that the men would of give me 60 men or a hundred men or 300 men and they were short, they'd grab whatever they could. So even my father who was employed in the ghetto had to go out--outside. Usually he did not go outside the ghetto. The problem was that this was a winter and they used to go out when it was dark and you know, father was very religious and he had to put down that film. During the day not during the night--you can not do it put it down. So he hid to put on the

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film in the morning before he went out put a forehead
on top of this film--a forehead and wh-whold day he use
to work like that and came back at night. That is
torture because anybody that knows that there are
certain limitations, certain restrictions what you can
do--you need it fever and you where it film. And that
is torture what few time he had to do it or other wise
he was not exposed to the outside of the ghetto.

SB: In--in the house, was it cold?

BZ: In the house, we had a oven that was heated by wood
and uh the back of feet was in the other room. It was
in between the two rooms and the same oven you use to
bake something and being like I said my father in the
uh--in the uh bakery so probably had maybe a little
better than most people. But in the
house--the--the--the--the--uh colder the house was more
or less bearable. We managed the best we could. Of

course, wh--it was not comfortable but manageable according to the ghetto standard. In one summer I remember, we had uh no where to put the garbage so in the back yard--these houses were separated and each one was a small houses and--and uh lots so the whole back-yards the--the uhh be--toilets were in the--the eh--eh--eh--eh separately little houses in the back-yard. And when the--you use to did a hole for garbage to put the garbage. When the hole were filled up, you--you--you uh covered it with the dirt and dug a hole next to it. And that's the way you go around to

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it--to get rid of--of the rubbish. One summer or spring morning, a guard and I take a look. There are certain weeds or certain ga--grass that grows on top of an old garbage dump. And I recognized that this is tomato to plants. And I didn't kept it a secret but this is definitely the tomato plants. So in the corner

of the house--what we had in the other side, I took this plants and made a garden. That year I picked a hundred and fifty kilo of tomatoes. Uh I was about 14--13/14. I use to sell the tomatoes. A kilo of tomatoes for 2 kilo of bread. That helped us survive. While other people had to do other things--

(End is cut off)

(Beep)

BS: Wentworth Films. Kovno Ghetto project. Continuation with interview with Berl Zisman. Camera roll 55 is up. Sound roll 27 continued.

(Cut)

BS: Camera roll 56 is up.

(Cut)

C: 56, marker 4.

SB: Um, let's talk a little bit more about foods. So

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you had the tomatoes but what other kinds of things did you have. And what ingenuity did your mother use for example and?BZ: What uh actually helped us a lot during that, I said before, three of my cousins stayed with us. One of them were was going out to work in a kitchen in Kovno. I don't know what kind of a place it was or for a army place or but one of the jobs was peeling potatoes. Of course the peeling potatoes and the peels they bring them home. And uh imagine that being that uh they needed the peels so that they get go home, they peeled a little heavier. But this was a uh one of the sustaining things--potato peels that came from kitchens and that way use to be washed, cooked, and all kinds of food made out of it. Even if you had to burn a little flour and make uh Kanadlak--you know, Kanadlakha--uh potato rolls. And they put in hot water and boil it and make soup out of it. That was part of that--of our diet. And whatever else you could find or trade or people that use to go outside of the ghetto and deal with the gentiles and the give away a piece of a sweater or a uh--or a uh a garment or uh jewelry or whatever they could find for anything for a piece of

food. But all in all we co--comparatively we had it
uh--we managed in ghetto eh for the ghetto standard the
best we could.

SB: And earlier you said you had to--had to cheat
somehow to survive. Tell me about that.

BZ: Well we did a lot of things uh to cheat uh we--we

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sto--we stole uh whatever we could, we needed wood.
You asked me about heating. Anywhere you had a piece
of wood that you could further tear off and bring it
home. That was uh--that was brought home. Anywhere
you could find a piece of uh a wire it went home. For
instance, we use to, we didn't have --we made ourselves
a uh what they call to--to make a high gl--uh hot
water. I took two spoons wired them up, hold out a
piece of cotton and uh--on--on--on a piece of wood and
when you connected it and put it in the water this is

boiling. You made uh makeshift things. I want to go back to the Kinder Actia when I said before when they found--the--the they found us in the bunker and they pulled us out and they made a selection and put part on one side and on the other side we did not know what's going on. But my father was on one side and I was on the other side. And then and one of the officers twist--turned it around. He said he sent my father on that side and me he pulled to the other side. We didn't know what was right and what was wrong. My brother and a girl, a daughter of the uh my neighbors escaped my uh miraculous. It was a game by the Germans had big dogs. And they told these two kids--go run! And the dogs started off to chase them. Somehow, as I said before, it was late in the afternoon. The dog chased them. The run around the houses. A couple times a dog grabbed my--my--brother by uh--by uh the arm but he had a heavy coat on so you couldn't--it couldn't bite him. And finally they hid behind a--a door and the dogs were called off and they remained

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TIMECODE NOTES:

there. That's how my brother survived the Kinder Actia. That was something that you survived from day to day. Every other day there was something else had it not been a minute before, minute after, you wouldn't of been here.

SB: And who--how did they let you and your father go that day?

BZ: My father was taken away with my younger brother in the Kinder Actia and I was pushed on the other side so I remained with the--with my mother and my brother in--in the ghetto. That was in uh '44. In uh--in--in--in uh spring of '44, early spring.

SB: Did they--did you father and--how old was you brother who went with you father then?BZ: 5 years my junior. 5 years younger than me. I was at that time 14/15 so he was uh 9/10.

SB: And did you see them get on buses?

BZ: That all I will saw them is on a truck and uh taken gone out of the ghetto. I haven't seen them since and maybe they--they go to Auschwitz as far as I know.

SB: And the Great Action: how did you find out what happened to the 10,000 people who were--

BZ: That was in a few days. That was the uh talk in

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TIMECODE NOTES:

the ghetto. A few days later, everybody said that they took them to the 9th Fort, which was uh down the highway that I just told we spoke about before. And there was and then there--there--they uh dug their ditches and in front of the ditches they uh machine gun--machine gunned them.

SB: And the mood of the ghetto changed after that?

BZ: That uh the Big Actia--that was uh most people said that's and Eteman. We are doomed. Sooner or later it was a question of time. Sooner or later it will be our--our uh time will be up. And as I said before, the religious people, uh even if they when they had a knife

on their throat don't give up hope. So that's what it was.

SB: And weren't books and religious practices forbidden? Tell me about the rules and as if I don't know about the ghetto. Tell me about the ghetto rules.

BZ: There was time. I don't know exactly when--when that was a uh command that all books to be--be brought outside; to be brought in a pile in uh--in the field there. So and any books we found them and like any if there's only one punishment in ghetto--killed. If you didn't obey the rules that's the only thing. The same thing is with the yellow uh star. Even before the ghetto closed, there was a uh every Jew had to where a

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TIMECODE NOTES:

yellow star on--on--on his uh lapel or on the front. I think later they put it up front and back.

SB: And what about religious practices? Was that allowed in the ghetto?

BZ: There wasn't--I don't think there was even any question. Nothing was allowed. But uh the few religious people that uh secretly kept it and when uh of course if we heard somebody coming, we dispersed immediately. And that was uh but we did practice we had da--did the most of the time we did have a median--mean that 10 people that used to sneak in and--and--and pray with the quorum. Many times we didn't have 10 and I was--wasn't 13 yet. They use to give me a book and counted me a mean there are--are that--that--we--we I was closed to 13 enough that they--they put me in the quorum.

SB: What about other things in the ghetto like culture? Or other social activities?

BZ: They did try to have some kind of social activities. I wasn't much involved. My family wasn't involved. But as far as religious activities like there was uh the few Rabbis or uh that--that religious people that tried to organized a little learning--a little teaching for the youngsters. There was something which called Karebutotem have Oshri whose right here in New York. Uh he organized uh for

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go--uh ya--youngsters to have a group to learn but of course it was the softer than it was--it couldn't be on a steady basis but as much as we could and whenever you can get away, there--there was a little bit learning but very little.

SB: Did you go to his group by any chance?

BZ: Yes I did go for uh I don't know for how long but I did go to belong to that group who's called the Farba-cholm.

SB: Tell me a little more about it but tell me about in an average day.

BZ: An average day till I went to that uh work eh the Plaineverstacten, we actually did nothing except uh be around the house; except the--the--the--the around the garden or planting something or a thing like that. But

later around, when you had to be in the morning to the Verstacten and there all day, and come back in the--in the house la--late--late in the afternoon. So that was more or less taking up with the--the--this. Uh very little teaching. The older ones use to have a get a chance use to teach for a while. While my father took a private individual and I--I--I that this--they could go there every day and--and--and--and ish they uh learned with me. They teach me. So that was uh but it was so much interruptions. So--so uh scarce the time that you could uh be

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uh feel safe and--and--and you did not want to show your face too much in the street in the ghetto.

SB: And y--because you were a kid?

BZ: Because a kid and because you don't want to uh--to--to--eh uh--you didn't wanted to appear. If you

are not a kid, you did--did--what--watch what you're doing. You were--if you you're uh an ad--adult you have uh supposed to be occupied or do something. You needed to eh uh just if you meet somebody going into the ghetto, it is terrible. If you saw a German and you--he disappeared, you--you are--you are hid.

SB: Have to put another roll on.

(Cut)

BS: Sound roll 28. Camera roll 57. Interview continued with--

(Cut)

C: Mark.

SB: 5. Um, tell me about the police in the ghetto. BZ: There was a police force. I--I had one incident with that police force. And that is while I was working in the--the Klainiverstacten and they needed somebody to go outside the ghetto to work for what ever reason I

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TIMECODE NOTES:

don't remember but I did not show up. And they came and arrested me and put me in jail; in ghetto. There was a jail in the ghetto. And I was miserable. There were characters in ghetto; in jail that I guess haven't--like never jail. And I had to stay overnight there. Even my father with all his protection; with all the people that he knew couldn't get me out before the next day. And I think our snag who's a friend of the family and he was a member of the Jewish committee had to intervene to let me out of that jail. That was the next day. That was my personal encounter with the police. All and all, I understand that they were a--as--uh--as--uh--as--uh whole they were helping the Jewish people rather than eh hurting them. Rather than getting out. So they were not collaborating with the Germans as I've heard other places but this is as a rule eh--eh generally. Of course there were--at one time, I understand there were--the policemen were arrested and they were tortured to they should tell about bunkers; about things in ghetto. To they give out secrets for the ghetto. And uh few of them succumbed eh--eh did give out but most of them stood their ground. This is far as my know--knowledge and

my--my--uh my personal uh--uh to do with--with the police. I do not--didn't know anybody personally that I knew as a policeman but as a whole, we were not afraid of the police--of the Jewish police. While eh for instance when I was in co--concentration camp, I wouldn't trust the coppers. They were terrible but in--in uh ghetto, we did not fear the police--the

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TIMECODE NOTES:

Jewish police; at least not our family.

SB: And tell me about the Rabbi of the ghetto and he uh you know.

BZ: The Kovno role was the uh the Avahahvum of Vumshapiro. That was the--that was he's name. He died in 1942. I personally as a kid, I was 9 or 10 years old, when I had a incident and that I met him and that was because there was a summer place, not far from Kovno, called Callituba. And he use to stay in a villa there.

And we were also, for the summer, in that place. One day I went in the street and I see him going out for a walk. I went over. I was very blatant as a young kid and I said, 'Good morning Kovno Role.' He took me for his hand and for a hour, he walked with me; asking me all kinds of questions and family. So I had a big honor and unusual that I had me that know--know him in person. He was very learn scholar for what I have in his book from Varabum. And uh in general he was very highly respected but uh in ghetto, I understand that they let him uh--live--let him alone. When he died and I went to his funeral. That was 1942.

SB: What was the funeral like?

BZ: I don't remember details . I only remember there was people not too many but there was people nevertheless went and uh to the funeral. I don't know where the burial ground was but then I remember the funeral

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TIMECODE NOTES:

and I remember going to the funeral.

SB: In the ghetto, did you ever have fun?

BZ: Fun? As normal as kids, regardless what doing outside, there's always--you--you leave the parent and the parent is always a you have to have uh what it is fun or play or--or--or--or games or interior games. Of course the--the--the be--be--between interruptions and between uh--uh the black clouds from the outside, we did not constantly believe, as children, we did not constantly have it on our minds. But uh we were reminded quite often that we were in ghetto. Quite often we were reminded. Uh my cousins were taken away. I don't remember what Actia. Either they were sent to Riga or they were sent away uh and then they were--they were not there anymore. After my father and my younger brother were taken away, I remained with my uh--with my brother the--the other brother and my mother. That was--we were numb. We couldn't--it wasn't a question--we weren't crying but we were--we were like num--just pieces of would. Uh, I remember it was 10/12 days before Passover. And Passover came, we called in a--a uh some acquaintance to make us say the--say the prayers or to say the. I think we had a couple Matsas there. But this was going through the--motions. Till after that--after Passover, I remember that the news

was that the Germans are retreating. Russians are pushing them back and it's only question when they will--what they will--will do or when they we do liqui-

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TIMECODE NOTES:

dating the ghetto and how they'll do it. The day came. At that time we were already too num to look for shelter, to look for bunkers, to hide. Some did hide and survived. Some hid and did not make it because a lot of the houses were burned to the ground. But they had a suspicion, anybody hiding there, they burned the--the uh houses to the ground when the ghetto was liquidated. But I understand about 7000 people, that they were liquidated from the ghetto and they took us into to--to uh the--the uh freight trains and it came--we came to Studhoff. That's where they separated the women from the and the children from the--from the other men. My brother wanted to go with my mother and my mother wouldn't let him. She understood that a better chance

for--even for a young kid, to be with the men in a working camp rather than to go with the women. And he wanted to go with mother--mother pushed him away. I uh you can imagine how hard for a mother to push away a child. But she figured that this is a better chance. From my mother, I never heard since. And I did hear about her that she was still alive. Eh in the beginning of the winter of uh 1944/45. A couple weeks after Sutkiss, somebody still saw her in--in--in that camp but uh near Studhoff. But after that we are never heard of her. My brother was and I myself we were sent ot Dakaw. In Dakaw, after the second week, the separated the younger kids and took away about a hundred and twenty--a hundred and thirty children and sent them back to Auschwitz and my brother with them. I remained in Laviawun till April of in--in uh '45. During that

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time, I worked in Mole and that was uh building a

underground air--airport for the Germans. To describe this airport, after I look at it and being in construction now, it was fabulous eh type of construction. The actually created a mountain, put a ten meter cover of solid cement with a reinforced with the--with the uh metal uh--metal rods. And afterwards, dug out the mountain from underneath--leaving a big large tunnel where two large planes can stay--can pass by each other side by side. And at the ends of the--at the side of it, the had the shops--the workshops. That was a fabulous idea. However, they did not finish it. My brother was sent in Auschwitz. I was sent in stayed in Dakaw till April. In April they took us back to when the--when the Americans came closer, the took us to Dakaw Proper and then from there afterwards we went on the Death march in Turoll and I was liberated in Turoll, May 5th. My brother I didn't find. Especially I didn't find him till the--the day before Yom Kipper of 1945, which is quite a few months after liberation. But I did hear about him in uh about 2 months or 3 months after the war ended that he was in Salbergs. And so the whole story--the way I went to look for him--couldn't find him because he went with the transporter--that he thought was going to Lithuania and then he found it--it--it--it was not going to Lithuania, he skipped the transport and came back to Austria and that's the second time. That's when I found him deep in Austria, in a--in a DP camp.

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TIMECODE NOTES:

SB: We have to put another roll.

BS: Go to camera roll number 58. Slate 6 is up.

C: 58 marker 6.

SB: Now I'll take you back to the ghetto. Tell me, as if I'm a kid--describe to me the Verstaten in the ghetto. What--who were they for? Who did they service? How many different ones? Were there a variety of the things there?

BZ: The way I understand, the committee in the ghetto, and that is Kovno ghetto, I think they--they were more loyal to the Jewish people to the in the ghetto than what I hear in other ghettos. They really transformed the ghetto in a work uh Laga--in a work force. Making the Germans, being dependent on the labor that the

ghetto was providing. And I think that is maybe be one of the reasons that Kovno ghetto survived longer than other ghettos. Because after a while, they became to be dependent on the labor forces--use to go out to the ghetto in different areas to do--to perform work. In the ghetto there was the Kleineverstaten and the Klei-severstaten. The Kleineverstaten was doing the small things and also services. Like I said before, for half-houses, for other uh areas, for farmers, to--to supply them with the uh necessary things. But the Kleisverstaten, even more so. They did a lot of the things like uh fixing uh shoes or fixing things. For

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the and--and--and clothing stuff that the Germans really needed it. And therefore this idea was everybody should be employed. To--they were hiding--if somebody could not be employed, they were hiding it and pushing it under--make sure that everybody has a name

and a number--they are employed. And this was the idea in ghetto and that's why I think the Kovno ghetto survived longer than the other ones. With this in mind--that was the idea that I became a--a uh Tin Smith and I came--I came to a concentration camp in Dakaw. They asked, 'Do you have any professionals?' 'Yes, I am a Tin Smith.' The end was I ended up in taking care of one of the officers in--in the Mole. For uh--for a long time, I took care of the uh hud. I had to make sure that I sweep--sweep up their uh--the uh--uh for-man's--they were Germans and there was uh big uh the--the--the big forman--that he had his special room. He was a big shot there. And the other ones had the front room but I had to make sure that every morning--I come in the morning--I heat--I make the ovens--I--I make uh heat--and I make the water and they come in for lunch--I have the something--the kettle on--the sound and so forth for this helped me too because I was a kid of uh 15/16 and uh that's uh. I use to do a good job. I use to clean up and make sure that everything is clean and everything is neat and everything is in order and uh the way I uh always--order--always there was a place. For a long time I worked like that. It was a time when I did go out for work and we use to work 12 hour shifts and in the 12 hour shifts we only had 2

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TIMECODE NOTES:

breaks of 15 minutes and they use to give us the what they call--what they call soup. Actually use to be moldy bread that's actually green and that's what they call--they--they--they b--they boil it, make soup out of it--the soup was green. And that was the--the--the--you had a bowl and that's what--that's what you ate. One break like that and we were working in the forrest, cleaning uh trees and knocking down trees and cleaning--and--and cleaning it for the lumber. I laid down on a bunch of branches and fell asleep. They probably wouldn't have missed me if they were not called back because the--the main work was to carry the cement from the wagons into that uh barn there that they had a--a uh--a system. They had a--a--a--a system where they are pouring out the cement from the bags in--on the ground and there was a school that was pushing the cement to the machines that were making the b--the concrete. What when the wagons were not there with the cement. I didn't come on time. The took us--use--took us to farthest to do other work.

When the wagons came we were called back. Every twenty people had a an S.S. storm trooper watching us besides the forman German to tell us what to do and that was for the Mole. I fell asleep and they had to go away and the counted and somebody missing. Now the German, the watchman, the S.S. man, would have gotten help from somebody missing. They were looking around. It took them about half an hour to three quarters of an hour and finally they were shouting and I woke up. That night, if I survived anything, that was the--the--the

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TIMECODE NOTES:

time that the guard saved me because I--we were--we were marching--we were 5 abreast--20 lines--a hundred people in the marching. The wanted--had to go from one place to the other place, they had to go stand abreast--3, 4 or 5 abreast and that's the way we were marching so the German could see exactly who is marching--how many people we are. Because he was late and

he got hell for not watching men, he wanted to take it out on me. He took the rifle and holding by the barrel, and he wanted to hit me over the head with the butt because if I'm dead because if I'm dead I'm accountable but if I'm missing, they're gonna--he gets hollered at. Fortunately, he didn't hit me over the head. He hit me over the shoulder. And the barrel broke in two. The rifle broke in two. He w--he kept it on a sling over his shoulder--half a rifle on the front--half on the back. But wherever he--he--he just looked for me--wanted to kick me and hit me. So I uh, the people who protected me, by if you said that he went to on the right side, then I changed places to the left side. The whole evening. The only time I was safe was when I was carrying cement because he wouldn't dare to--to--to ki--to break and--and--and--and ruin a bag of cement. That's--that's how he will not hit me. So the minute I was in line, it use to be like this: there use to be 10 people, two people were loading on the shoulder, 6 people were running and 2 people were taking it off. So the minute I was lined the 6 people to take the next sho--the next uh bag--I may have been the 5th or the

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4th. If I see him coming, I was the first--put a bag on my shoulder, running back with the cement. And that's how a whole night that's how it went down. That was one experience. There other experiences where I had a gun or a rifle right to my face and uh somehow uh wh--I don't know the reasons but I'm still here.

SB: Did you build an alarm clock in the ghetto?

BZ: Yes.

SB: Tell me about that.

BZ: I don't know how you--that you know about the alarm clock. We did not--we didn't use uh Saturdays--there was electric--little electric but uh I told you before, in the same room we ate, the same room we played, the same room we slept. And we needed a little light and Saturday we didn't--we don't put out the lights. Before uh the uh Holocaust or now, we have either regular alarm clock or regular time clock and we have uh people that allowed to put on and put off the lights so no problem. But there was a problem. So what we

did is I took a regular alarm clock that you wind up and you take the--the wrap around a piece of string and put it on the switch. You put it--the clock tight on the wall and when the time comes this starts rolling, it shuts of the light. This was we built ourselves. That's what you call alarm clock. When the time comes, it shut off.

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TIMECODE NOTES:

SB: Um, and tell me about the council. Tell me about the administration in the ghetto--what you knew about them.

BZ: The administration, while I was in ghetto, I had little to do with it--with them because I was a youngster except with my father and he being a permanent eh Kovno citizen, knew everybody and everybody knew him. So all the politics that went on, more or less, we knew it in our house. And all I know is what I

heard--overheard the adults talking about. And the counsel was--it had many many predicaments like if they made a demand--the Germans made a demand to--to--to make an Actia, they had to make a decision. Are we gonna cooperate with them or we'll say no--we don't--we're not--we're not cooperating. By not cooperating it--it means two things. Either they can kill them all and the Germans did on their own or they can uh maybe sometimes uh intervene but uh they did not. I think, that the--the counsel did not cooperate and not collaborate with the Germans. As much as they could, they tried to protect the Jewish people.

SB: We have to put up one more roll.(Cut)

BS: Sound roll 29. Camera roll 59.

(Cut)

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TIMECODE NOTES:

C: 7.

SB: Can you tell me about your brother's Bar Mitsva?

BZ: Yes I'll tell you. I was Bar Mitsva in ghetto in 1942. I remember the uh necessary uh things to learn. An uncle of mine who is still there, taught me and I uh said my uh Dreshum and my--my speech and I uh, in ghetto, it was on a Saturday. But more imp--more uh vivid--more uh interesting is my brother's Bar Mitsva which came out on a Sukis. In ghetto, my father, as much as he could, with the minimum uh, possibility that he had, kept up whatever he could, as far as religious uh things to do. And we had Asuka. Asuka means when we take a couple old doors and cover it up with some of the clothes which is the Asuka and we had Asuka in ghetto. My brother who was born on Yom Kipper, had a Bar Mitsva in Sukis and at that time, we had a few people that with dining was over, playing in our house after that went into the Asuka and my mother whatever she wished took it from I don't know where--had a couple of cookies and uh what we called uh something to save a Ahiem on and the had a celebration--the Suki around the table. At that time, one of the secre-taries--secretary for the committee passed by and my father called him into the Suka and uh he backing off not to want to come in because he was called for an

important meeting in the committee. Nevertheless, my father took a hold of him, wouldn't let him go, pulled him in the Suka, introduced him to the people and uh he

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TIMECODE NOTES:

got pulled in. He was served the uh, also the refreshments whatever it was and then he was told that this is a Bar Mitsva of my brother. He was amazed and this is one of the two rights in the book. He was amazed how the religious people can forget about all of the trials and tribulations, all the was doing outside in the ghetto and eh--eh--eh and the Germans and still be devoted and some of us to--to play and to sing. Even so the song was something that expressed the hopefulness in the worst situations, we still the hope to--to God to ask him. So much so, that the man ends his book that he envys those who believe. And that was my father's character; to make somebody happy. I know of a other story that somebody would ask what are you

doing on this street, you don't live here. People use to go out to work for a long long day from early morning to night and that man used to pass by our house, said you don't live here what are you doing here? Said well I was hoping maybe I would meet Fivel Zisman and a few words would enliven me--would--would--would--would condole me for the next day or so. That was the character of my father and that was the way people thought of him. To speak to him a few words was enough to uplift somebody and unfortunately with all the hope, some of them did not materialize. And he went perished in the Holocaust like so many other millions. But the Bar Mitsva of my brother was something special that other people in ghetto could celebrate together with him.

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Interviewed (5-7-97) by Sandra W. Bradley

Wentworth Films, Inc. 9400 Kendale Rd, Potomac, MD 20854

TIMECODE NOTES:

SB: Was religion a form of resistance?

BZ: It was not a question of resistance. It was a question that we will not give up. That we'll not surrender. We will do us, what ever happens, we will still do us will hope and with prayer to God that some how, hopefully, we'll survive. And those that did, did. I did.

SB: And the year that this Bar Mitsva took place, when--when was this relative to the Kinder Action?

BZ: That was a half a year before the Kinder Action. This was in--in the beginning of the winter and the Kinder Action was at the end of the winter.

SB: Did you know anything about Partisans?

BZ: We heard about it through the grape vine and a matter of fact, I had somebody that came into ghetto that I knew from before the ghetto and he use to come in dissappear and reappear. And he use to go, sneak out of the ghetto somehow and he belonged to the Partisan. He is alive now. He is what's his name Usic--uh I don't--I can't recall his name what yes he--he went to the Partisan.

SB: And can you, again, describe to me the hiding place? Did you help build the hiding place?

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TIMECODE NOTES:

BZ: Yes sure we help dig that--that tunnel. And uh I

SB: What did you do with the dirt?

BZ: On--on all four to dig a tunnel in the ground, support it with whatever we could, pieces of lumber, pieces of wood to--to support. The only way to get in is as I described before is through that uh basement of that vestibule and there was a slab of cement that when you took it out and then you could inside you had a way to put it back in place--to pull it back in place. That when you looked at it, you see--you could see crack in the cement but you wouldn't not recognize that this was something like a door. You had to go on all four to creep into that and c--and uh 10/12 feet to go to that room that was dug out there in the room was made like uh a couple of beds like uh the one a top--one a top of the other. And that's the way if people see it set or--or laid down and there was also a

problem with air. So there was a pipe in the back of that shed in the bushes there, we left a one pipe for air to--to--to--to have some air inside there. The tunnel was like a wide. It had a uh turn that it went to the--to the uh well and anytime you wanted to, you could fetch some water with a pail and a rope and from there it went back to the--to the shirt where underneath the shirt, maybe two or three feet underneath there was two feet of dirt on top of it and underneath there, there was a bunker. So yes we built it and took us months to build it. Of course this was not only at

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TIMECODE NOTES:

night. One night the well dissapeared. No--nobody knows there's any trace of it. That we covered. We took a couple of rings, covered it up and--and--and filled them with dirt. Make sure that the growth--the--the some growth on top of it like nothing--nothing before. And that was the--the--the bunker. While there, air

was eh the biggest problem. We had also--in made a couple cans and--and--and the--the little food we did have and we spared something and right up make what we call uh Soccerringus. Made bright pieces of bread into cans, in case we have to stay there for more than Day or two, we would have something to--to nourish ourselves. Cuz we also left in cans in that bunker. But when they came in, we knew that we are found out, we had no choice but to get out of there. Had we staid there, ther would have blown up the whole thing.

SB: And what did you do with the dirt when you...?

BZ: The dirt that we put on the side and then put in on top and spread it out and put in--in--in--in on top of the well as well as there's a hole. The dirt was--it was problem when it was spread out over the gardens, especially if they did it in--in--in the uh the time that the--the--the--it was not uh the winter that people in there was big lots around the houses. It wasn't just the houses. It was a house and a lot. So there was places to put the dirt and spread it out.

SB: Okay, thank you. Have I not asked you anything you

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TIMECODE NOTES:

think is important?

BZ: No, I don't know what else you want to know. I mean a lot of interesting stories that I have in for instance, in ghetto, since I was Bar Mitsva I use put on it film everyday. In concentration camp, we only had one pair of film and that was my last day. Many times it use to be, he use to be--he use to work day--day--day shifts--night shift and the way you use to meet and pass by and--and--and they passed by, we passed over each other--that's why--all this was taking chances with your life because had you been caught you probably they put you up and shoot--shoot you. The damage was the biggest uh thing to make you an example. The--the--the if they--they uh hold somebody in the ghetto, the pulled everybody out and they in--in--on the lot in a--in a open field, an everybody had to run out for that--go out from the houses and watch uh somebody being hung. In concentration camp, somebody took a blanket--or what I say?--5 people took a blanket, tore it up and made Smata--you know what Smatas are eh?--to cover the feet--there were no socks--just

to cover the feet in the winter. So they put a blank--a
tall blanket--for that 5 people were hung. In--

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