

61, marker one.

Mark.

Helen, why don't you begin by telling me when and where you were born and the name you were born with?

OK. I was born in Kovno, Lithuania in 1932, September 15. My maiden name was Verblunsky. And my family consisted of my father and mother and the younger brother. He was born in-- my brother was born in 1937. And that was our family, our immediate family.

Tell me a little bit about your childhood before the war started.

My childhood was uneventful. My mother stayed home after-- she had a business. But after I was born, soon after, she gave up her business and stayed home with me-- and then with my brother, too, of course.

My father was self-employed. He had a business where he was making heating ovens for heating houses, actually, with ceramic tiles. That's what they turned out to be.

But they were roundish and straight. And you put the wood into the oven. And that's how the house was heated. And that was his business.

I was a pretty bright kid, from what I was told. I used to sing a lot. I used to like to sing. I used to like-- I learned the Yiddish alphabet at a very young age. And I went to kindergarten at the age of five and six.

And then, at age seven, I went to school. It was first grade, age seven, which was Hebrew school, a private school. My parents were not very-- they didn't have a lot of money, but they felt like they wanted me to get a very good education. It was just a girls' school. And I had one year of this school.

And in September of '40, I started the school. And I went under the Russians. And then I learned Yiddish. So that was my formal education, as far as going to school is concerned.

I used to always-- I always read a lot. My father really actually instilled in me of the desire for knowledge, the curiosity. He would always-- he told me always about the world, about the United States.

He even told me that the United States will probably turn out to be the place that will rescue the Jews from the Nazis. That was always his contention. That was always this belief, actually. And I believed that with him. And he told me about history and geography.

And even when I was very young, five and six years old, he would take me to museums and to theater, because I was an only child for quite a while. And then, when my brother was born, he was even too young to be taken. So my father-- and my mother was not too much interested. So he took me as his companion. And we spent an awful lot of time together-- my mentor, really, my father.

And how do you remember things changing? And what kinds of things did you see and hear when things changed?

Interesting. Our house consisted of a kitchen. We rented. We didn't own a house. A kitchen that you went through, that was the first, and then a living room, a living room combination sort of.

It was one room, but it was a sofa-- and a dining room, and a table, and chairs, and a buffet. So that was the living room and combination dining room. And then, through this, you went into the bedroom. And in that bedroom, the four of us slept.

Now, in 1938, we acquired a refugee border, a young man by the name of Herman, a Jewish young man who ran away from Germany and ended up in Lithuania, in Kaunas, in our home, as what we called in those days a [NON-ENGLISH], which is a border. And I came to know first hand at a very young age, in the 1938--

how old was I then? '32, '38, so I was six years old-- six, seven, or whatever, because he stayed with us for about a couple of years, at least. And I was very-- and I came face to face with a person like that.

And also, as I said, my ears were always open. I knew what was going on. I heard about the No Man's Land. I go back. I heard about that when I was just a young child-- between Poland and Germany, where the Jews were not their-- Germany didn't want them. And Poland didn't let them in.

And I remember we, children, we were asked also from school to get together clothing and things that people needed for daily use, and food, and for the refugees that have nowhere to go. They were sort of caught in the middle. So I really have a very vivid memory of that. It comes to my mind quite often, as a matter of fact.

And what about the sounds of the war? Did you hear?

Yes. Now, the sounds of the war-- the war did not affect us directly, not until 1941. We knew what that things were happening. There was a war with Poland.

We heard the news. We had a radio. And the newspapers wrote about it. And I knew how to read. And I was interested.

But in 1941, when the Russians were attacked by the Germans, our windows-- it was a Sunday morning at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning. And our windows were shaking like an earthquake, shattering. And that's also very vivid in my mind. And that's when it started for us, the war, that the war came to us finally started.

How did you feel then? And what did you do? What did your parents--

OK. As I said, almost immediately, there was no question whether should we, or shouldn't we. The very same day, my parents got together some belongings that were maybe some valuables that they had, and some things that we would need for our existence and on route or some kind, to subsist, on whatever, some food.

And we packed us up, the two children, and amongst many thousands, and all the Jews that-- you would see those roads. They were black with people walking-- there were no cars, there were no horse and buggy, nothing-- by foot, trying to get away from the Nazis, trying to get to the Russian border to outrun the Nazis, the Germans. And that's what my parents did.

And what happened?

What happened? We were on route for two-- we were on route. We walked and walked. We were every-- the tanks were-- they overtook us. It was really-- if it wouldn't be so sad, it wouldn't be so tragic, it was very funny, because we were going nowhere, because the German military were just passing us.

And they were singing songs. And they were making fun of us. And there was one that was going, [GERMAN], going to Zion, aren't you? He's making fun of us, like the Jews are going to Zion, to whatever he meant.

And we finally ended up in a small town-- in a village, actually, a village-- by the name of Zaim. Now, I don't know the Lithuanian name of the Zaim. I think this is the Jewish name, the Jewish way of pronouncing it.

This is mark two.

Mark.

So you just arrived at the town.

All right. We were taken in by a Jewish family who owned a farm. I think it was a small farm. I don't recall anything big. But I remember they had a couple of cows. I remember having drank milk straight-- the milk,

newly freshly milked from the cow, warm from the udders.

And they took us in. And we stayed with them for two weeks, the four of us, plus two young men-- two young Jewish boys, really.

And we stayed with them for two weeks, like we would have been their family, that's how. And they were a small family, too. I remember a couple of children.

And we realized-- I mean, when I say we, at that point, I was not even nine yet. So my parents talked it over with the people of the house, of that farm. And they decided that, no point in us hanging around. We have to go back to our homes, to our home, which they did.

My parents made arrangements with-- they hired a local person, a Lithuanian who owned a horse and then carriage for the six of us, the four of us and the two young boys that were with us, to take us back to our home town, to Kovno. We loaded up whatever-- I mean, whatever we carried, we took back with us, and got on the buggy, and that carriage, whatever, the wagon. And we just got out of town. It was a little town.

And we realized that we're being chased by a couple of young guys, barefooted. It was in June, or at the end of June, or beginning of July, around then-- barefoot, with torn pants, peasant boys, peasant young men. And they motioned to stop, to stop. And the fellow, our driver stops the buggy. And we are ordered to get out.

And we knew that nothing good is going to come of that. We were scared. But we knew enough as children, too. We children, we were scared. They started to search the men for weapons.

And they found-- and in the-- whatever. We had a [? stand, ?] the things-- that bag, or whatever. And they found something. And it turned out to be the phylacteries, my father's, and the boys' too.

So they realized-- OK, he says. Oh, you're not communists. OK, you go. And they let us go. But we did not get to go back on that carriage, on that wagon. And they took away all our things. So that was part of the experience we had with the local people.

And it took time, of course, by foot. We walked back to our hometown. We slept in barns. The local peasants, they did let us. Sometimes, they didn't know. We made it back and came to our home.

And we heard the very sad news that, between the time that the Russians left in such a hurry-- when they were attacked, they left in a great hurry. And the Germans took a few days to get back, to coordinate to get in, into the city of Kaunas. There was a pogrom. And many were murdered-- elderly, children.

And this was in Slobodka. I don't know if the Slobodka ever came up in your interviews or not. But that's where the ghetto ended up being established, in Slobodka. In Lithuanian, it was called Vilijampole, if that rings a bell. I don't know.

It so happened that our home was within the perimeter of the ghetto. They're very close today to the gate, actually. But when we came back, there was no ghetto yet.

But all edicts were, all kinds of edicts-- not to walk on the sidewalk, and only to shop at certain times in particular stores, and of course right away to put on the yellow star on the front and back, that was immediate, and so on. And that same fall-- now, I don't remember exactly when the ghetto was established. Was it in September, or August?

In August.

Mid-August, right? The 15th of August, I think.

Yeah.

Yes. And--

But just back up a little bit.

Yes, OK.

[INAUDIBLE].

Yes, OK.

Tell me where the ghetto was established and that your house fell in it.

Yes. The ghetto was established-- we lived on what was called in Lithuanian Kriščiukaičio gatvė, or Kriščiukaičio Street. I know it's a tongue twister. It's Lithuanian. What Kriščiukaičio means, I don't know. It's probably a name after somebody.

In Yiddish, it had a different name totally. It was called [PLACE NAME], [PLACE NAME] street. Why it was so-called, I don't know, either. We lived number 29 Kriščiukaičio Street.

Just a few numbers before that, there was a synagogue on the same street, which was converted into a jail. They called it the [? daboklė ?]. I don't know if that term ever came up, if you heard it from the other interviewees. And the ghetto gate was just at our street.

But it was-- there was-- the Lithuanian name of it was Ariogalos gatvė. And in Yiddish, it was called [PLACE NAME]. [YIDDISH] means the dead people, the dead street, where people died.

Am I telling you something that you didn't hear before? Yeah, it seems very strange. You look-- I don't know, your look on your face.

And that's where the main gate was. And we were surrounded by barbed wire, of course. And they established a ghetto, a big ghetto and a little ghetto.

But let me retract myself right now. Now, prior to the ghetto, of course all the Jews from the surrounding areas and from the city proper of Kovno were all evacuated. They were not evacuated. They were told to take what they can carry, all the belongings that they can carry. They cannot take a truck and take their belongings, no way. But whatever they can carry in their hands, they should go to the ghetto, and leave everything else behind.

And it so happened that my mother had an elderly aunt whose name was Esther. And their last name was Zalk. And she had a family, children. One daughter was named Leah. And one son was named Pinchas.

And Pinchas had just married recently. And Pinchas, and Leah, and Pinchas' wife ran away. They never returned. They ran like we started to run away. We came back to the ghetto. They never made it back.

So this elderly lady and her daughter, who was-- in our day and age, this is what politically correct we call-- she was mentally handicapped. And so these two women, because the father of the family-- and I'm retracting even further.

When the war broke out, the Lithuanians shot him dead on the-- he was walking to shul, to synagogue, and they shot him. So the two ladies were left alone. So they moved in with us, in our home in the ghetto. And that's why I took all this back. It's important.

So the ghetto was surrounded from the outside of-- as I said before, from the small towns, and from the city. We're all gathered into the ghetto. And a bridge was built across a highway. It wasn't a highway. It was like-- they called it the [NON-ENGLISH], which was highway, actually in-- you'd call it highway. It was a main thoroughfare.

The people who lived on the street were mostly Jewish. So they built the fence right in front of the homes where the big ghetto was on one side, built a bridge to go across, and fenced in the other side, and made a smaller part of the-- they called it the [NON-ENGLISH] ghetto, the small ghetto. So that is how the ghetto started.

We have to put another roll of film on.