Interview with Mayer Galler
Holocaust Oral History Project
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Q: MAYER, TELL ME WHERE YOU WERE BORN AND WHAT YEAR.

A: I was born at the end of 1914 in Bialystok, Poland.

Q: AND WHAT SIZE WAS YOUR FAMILY?

A: We were four people, and my grandmother. Two brothers, parents, and my grandmother.

Q: WHAT WAS YOUR FATHER'S BUSINESS? WHAT DID YOUR FATHER DO?

A: My father was--he worked on the textile. In the beginning he worked on the textile room in a factory, and then he bought a textile room and worked by himself. And they manufactured--most of the city lived from textile and this kind of thing.

Q: AND WAS YOUR FAMILY VERY RELIGIOUS? WHAT KIND OF RELIGIOUS LIFE DID YOU HAVE? SYNAGOGUE? SHUL?

A: I attended synagogue until the age of 14. My father was religious. My mother was less religious, so what we observed is Sabbath every week. And in the evening my father used to pray every day, and when I was home, he insisted I should go with him to the synagogue.

Q: DID YOU GO TO A SECULAR SCHOOL OR RELIGIOUS SCHOOL? WHAT KIND OF SCHOOL DID.YOU ATTEND?

A: I started in a secular school. Let's see, no, we can call it a religious school I started. I was deeply involved in religious studies until the age of about 9. Then I had an incident in the heder. The rabbi

pulled me from the ear and tore off half the ear, and after this I said I don't go any more to this school, and I switched to a private secular school. You can call it a--like, a high school.

Q: WAS THERE ANY PROBLEM WITH BEING A JEW GOING TO A SECULAR HIGH SCHOOL, OR IT WAS OPEN?

A: The secular school was a Jewish school because the normal high school that existed had about a thousand students, and very few Jews could attend the high school. It was maybe in about a thousand students, maybe about 10 or 12 were Jewish people, not more. The Jewish population was forced to attend private high schools, and I attended one of them in our city which was about 60,000 Jews. They had about six or seven high schools including Hebrew school, Yiddish school and gymnasium, and about four or five secular general high schools, and I attended one of them.

But the one thing, you had to pay for your education in the private schools, where in the government schools you wouldn't have to pay, but only the richest people could afford to go because they had connections with the Poles and they were admitted. I knew 12 people, I think, maximum that I remember.

Q: SO YOU WENT TO SECULAR HIGH SCHOOL. WHEN DO YOU FIRST REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME YOU MET WITH ANTISEMITISM?

A: Antisemitism was a fact of life because we knew we lived in this region, and if we would go farther out of the town where the most of the Polish persons were, there we had to be careful because they would throw stones and all; but we accepted it as a normal way of life. We didn't think it was antisemitism at that time, at least I didn't think it.

Q: ALL RIGHT. DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST SIGN OF HITLER COMING TO POWER? WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER?

A: Well, I remember it well because I graduated high school, the private high school, which I had to go for special, what do they call it, external exams in order to get the mature, which made you eligible to go to the university; and I went in 1933. I attended the University in Warsaw. In the beginning I started in Vilnius, but Vilnius was a much poorer Jewish population than Warsaw, and I could only survive on tutoring other students.

Then after several months I transferred from Vilnius to Warsaw. Warsaw was much richer and there I had enough tutoring to survive on my own.

Q: WHAT WERE YOU STUDYING?

A: I studied mathematics. Of course I was a very good mathematician in high school, but during the year I saw the conditions in Poland. I saw that I couldn't get a job with a government high school, and that Jewish high schools were on a very low budget because they were supported only by students tuition and fee which was very low. And it was very high competition because in my town for example, most of the teachers came from Galicia, which was southern Poland at that time, and in competition with them; they used to be paid very low, and I saw that I'll be in bad shape if I continue my mathematics.

In my case, for example, I didn't want to go in the footsteps of my father and be a textile worker. I saw the life he had, and I tried to do everything in order to liberate myself and be more independent and have a better life, and I knew--saw this is the one, the best way for me to do it.

So after the first year of mathematics, I switched to Agricultural University in Warsaw. There I already started to feel antisemitism after this.

Q: IN WHAT WAY? DO YOU REMEMBER?

A: First of all, at that time when Hitler came to power--and in Poland there was Pilsudski who was a liberal man, he died in '34; and the people who followed him were more antisemetic, more inclined to please the Polish antisemites. I felt it in this step at school.

The first year was still possible because we still had some relations with the Polish students. At the school we had Polish students, Ukrainian, White Russians, and Jews. So we had some relations, even we studied together to exams, but the next year things completely changed. People who worked with us together, who studied with us together didn't recognize us.

And another fact was, for example, they had a dormitory. They had many dormitories, but no Jews could enter a Polish dormitory. Ukrainians, White Russians, Poles, yes. So in 1927-28 the Jewish community in Warsaw with assistance I think of joint, built a dormitory. It was far away from the schools in Praga, which was a suburb of Warsaw. It was, I think, a five or six story building, and there all the Jewish students from all kinds of schools could enter and live there. Sure we had to pay for this.

Being there for sure I became more aware of the problems involved. Of course, almost everybody had some problems, and no one wanted to be there. At that time transportation was quite complicated because the school was at the other end of the city, in the Polish sector, and in order to travel there it had to take me about ten hours, so I used to lose a lot of time.

But I was young and it was acceptable to me, and I knew I had to suffer before I entered paradise.

Then at school what happened, we had some medical assistance at school. And it was included in the tuition and fees that we paid, but each time if you wanted to go to a doctor, you had to buy a ticket. The ticket was in the office of the Polish Student Organization, and they are anitsemetic officially. They had signs to show; there was a crucifix in their office, and there were signs "We Demand Our Schools to be Free of Jews." Imagine we had to enter and buy the tickets. They would sell us the tickets, but it was a very unpleasant situation.

And then the Polish Student Organization, they also had a cafeteria. And the first year we used to come there sometimes to eat and study, there were tables available. But the next year we were forbidden to enter. So, there is not a place to study, and even to eat. We had to go farther away. Sometimes we traveled around three or four miles in order to go to a restaurant because we looked for a cheaper restaurant. We didn't go to any one that is expensive. And this was again another blow that came to the Jewish students.

And then in '35, the Polish Student Organization decided that Jews can sit only on one bench. There were many in the main auditorium where most of the classes were for the first three years. And we had also our own organization, Jewish organizations for--in the five years in all classes we had maybe about 60 Jewish students, which was, this was a--I think I mentioned it was an agricultural university. In other schools, like in Warsaw University Polytechnic Institute was all, it was the same conditions

or even worse. And the student organization decided that we won't sit down on the benches. And for the next three years, if we had classes in this auditorium we are standing. Out in the benches, by the wall, facing the lecturer. And all this lasted until the beginning of World War II.

I graduated in 1939 from the agricultural school. And the reason I went to an agricultural school because, first of all, I thought maybe I'll emigrate to Isreal, and with mathematics is the same problem I'll have in Poland, a lot of competition. They don't need too many mathematicians, but agriculture I could use there. So I switched to agriculture.

Q: WERE YOU A MEMBER OF ANY YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS FOR ALIYAH?

A: No. I was supervisor of--it was (Greenbaum) at that time was in charge. He was the head of the general Zionist Organization. I was a member of the student section of this organization.

Q: WHAT HAPPENED AFTER YOU GRADUATED?

A: Oh, I had problems, because I--in the last two years I switched from pure agriculture to nutritional science, which was a department in the same school. I had to take additional year and a half of chemistry and biochemistry, this type of things. And I submitted everything including my thesis in 1939, a month before the war started. I had to take my finals in October, but the war started and at that time I left the city because they ordered all able-bodied men eligible to serve in the army to leave.

I got my assignment. I traveled to [illegible] where I had to come to appear to my superiors. It was a very hard way to come there because all the railroads and everything were bombed and didn't work. Most of the time we had to travel, or take, join some farmers who with wagons and

horses used to go there. But when I came to [illegible] the war was over.

Q: SO YOU WERE DRAFTED INTO THE POLISH ARMY?

A: You see as a student I had some kind of deferment, but in case of war I had my assignment. I had to come to [illegible], this was an infantry division. I had to come to [illegible] which I followed. It was appealed from the, the Warsaw President appealed to all able-bodied people, young people, to leave the town and go to their destinations, and that's what I did.

Q: WHEN DID YOU ARRIVE?

A: I arrived, it was already the 17th or 18th of September. So it was about almost two and a half weeks, but I left Warsaw not immediate. I left Warsaw about the 6th or 7th, so it was about ten days.

Q: THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

A: You see they kept the officers, the Russians; and civilians they simply investigated and let them go. So I went back to my parents in Bialystok.

And then I started communications with my professor who remained in Warsaw. And I asked him should I come to take my exams, and he said yes, that he'll discuss it with the German authorties. His wife was German and he spoke very fluent German. They promised that they will let--they closed the schools, but all the people who submitted their thesis, who had to take a final exam, they would let them take the exams.

When I came to Warsaw, you had to cross the border between Russia and Germany. It wasn't dangerous, but still there are some problems because this was illegal basically. And I stayed in Warsaw for several months

under the Nazis. And I waited for permission to take the finals. It never came.

But I was lucky because I worked in Warsaw as a student after I started in the nutritional science department. I worked in a oil and margarine factory. The brother of the community center, the Jewish community center in Warsaw, he owned it and I worked for him before the war. When I came to Warsaw they admitted me back to this work even though it was already under German supervision.

This gave me a pass which they call it "[illegible] Juden" which means "useful Jew" and this pass--sometimes they used to make some searches of their own and take off people from the streetcar, but this gave me the right to continue my trip. They never took me off. But I had to suffer with the rest of the population because they had problems with water, electricity, this type of thing, so it was a very hard life during the several months.

And then when the order came, the executive order came for Jews to concentrate in the ghetto, I decided things don't get better, they get worse, and I crossed the border back again to Bialystok. And from Bialystok I traveled to Lvov which was already under the Russians.

And they had a similar department like ours in Warsaw, it was a polytechnic institute in Lvov. When I came there, I remember in the beginning I had difficulties because there was a committee of students who left Warsaw the way I left. And this committee screened students who are eligibel to be engineers in a communist society or not. I was--in the beginning they rejected me because of my background. My father was a worker so it was good, but they had some reservations about my background with

Zionist, but finally the committee voted to admit me.

Q: WHY DID YOU GO TO RUSSIA?

A: There wasn't any better place to go at that time. I know many people who crossed the border to Lithuania, but this was only people with, you needed a lot of money. With little money when you came there it was better than Poland, but not much better. There was a large concentration of refugees from Warsaw, from other parts of Poland, western part of Poland which was under the Nazis.

Q: WHAT YEAR IS THIS?

A: This was--it was still in '39, beginning of '40.

Q: DURING THIS TIME DID YOUR FAMILY STAY?

A: Oh, they stayed. In Bialystok there was no ghetto at that time. They stayed in their house and everything was normal, except the conditions were different. My father worked the way he used to work. I don't think they confiscated the room that he owned, but they let him work in it.

Q: OKAY. SO, YOU'RE IN RUSSIA AND WHAT HAPPENED?

A: I went to Lvov, and in May I got my diploma.

Q: I HAD A QUESTION, WHY DID YOU KNOW GERMAN?

A: Oh, first of all, German we knew because in our schools--because I thought I'll--you had a choice, German or French. I started with French and then I decided German would be more useful for me for my employment, and I took German.

Q: AND RUSSIAN?

A: Russian, I started to speak Russian when I was born. My parents spoke with me Russian and Yiddish, but--and the Russians--Poland became

only independent, really independent in my part of Poland in 1920-21 after the failed invasion of Russia.

When I went to--simply too many years I forgot. But later in the '30s when I started to work on my thesis, I needed a lot of books. And the books, German books, or Engligh were even more expensive than the German books, I felt that I wouldn't be able to afford it. They had a book store, a Russian book store in Warsaw and the same books, translation, sometimes original books you could get for a tenth of the price. And I thought I could save some money and I started to restore my Russian.

And in this way it took me maybe three months or so, I mastered the Russian, at least in, I think, in reading. And I started working with this so my Russian was quite good when the Russians came to Poland.

Q: SO, YOU GOT YOUR DEGREE AFTER ABOUT FIVE MONTHS, AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

A: And then they assigned me immediately, when you get--when you graduate from a university in Russia, they give you an assignment to work. I know it's possible to get a new home, but they don't like it because they try to put you where they need you. They assigned me, and I was lucky that they gave me an assignment.

I was technical manager of a cannery in Lvov. It was basically not one cannery, it was small canneries that they nationalized, and they put it all together. But they were in different parts of the city. So I had to manage the canneries there.

Q: WHAT WAS THE CITY?

A: Lvov.

Q: SPELL IT.

A: L-v-o-v. In Polish it's Lvov. It was one of the third largest cities in Poland.

Q: WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE FOR YOU?

A: It was a regular Russian or Soviet employee. I got my salary. It was maybe 50 rubles more than the regular employees, but I had more responsibility for the quality, for the production, this type of thing. It was--but, I was young and I managed it without going to jail.

Q: HOW LONG DID THAT JOB LAST?

A: This job lasted about May until, less than a year.

Q: WHAT HAPPENED?

A: Then in Lvov, it was about three months before the war started between Germany and the Soviet Union. I had a friend who went to Lithuania, he wrote to me that there the conditions there was much better, and in the town, this was Kaunas, used to be the capital of Lithuania before Vilnius became the capital. He told me that they are building an oil and margarine factory, and they hire a lot of specialists. He talked to the manager of the construction and others agreed, and they sent me an invitation to come there to work.

Sure I had to go to my managers and tell them the story that this is more specialized than the work I am doing there, and they let me go.

Q: NOW, WHAT WERE BAD ABOUT THE CONDITIONS WHERE YOU WERE?

A: In Lvov? I don't know whether you can call it bad because according to Soviet standards I had a good life, a normal life. Depends what standards you measure with.

I think I had enough to eat. I had food, vegetables, so I couldn't complain about this. The one thing that I have to admit, I didn't feel any discrimination that I felt in Poland. In Russia I felt that I'm one of them. I never felt any discrimination in Russia.

Q: A WORKER?

A: A worker, yes. They used to pay me. I used to have to come and do my work. From the time I have to be--however, I used to work overtime because I was worried about the production.

We had several shifts deeper in the season, during the summer in 1940, and I felt if something would be spoiled or so; this is a very tricky production to come and deal with live fruit and vegetables, this type of thing. So I had to be careful, but I managed it.

But I felt that by going to Kaunas first of all, I'm getting a job more suited for my background. And secondly, the economic conditions are much better in Kaunas.

Q: WHAT WAS THE NAME OF THE TOWN?

A: Kaunas. K-a-u-n-a-s. It used to be the capital of Lithuania before the war.

Q: THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

A: In Kaunas I was about three months--no, I married. Immediately when I graduated school in 1940, in May, I married. My wife was a student in Warsaw. We were going out together for about four years, five years and she came from Lublin.

Then Lublin was under the Nazis and she escaped from Lublin and came to Lvov. But being from Lublin it was a refugee, considered. She was

exposed to being exiled deep into Russia. So at that time when this situation came up, I decided the time is now to get married so she'll be able to stay here. Because my passport--they gave me immediately a passport because I was born there and lived there and the parents were there; and she was, for them she was a foreigner, a refugee.

And then this way I saved her temporarily from being exiled deep into Russia which later I regretted because when I left from Lvov going to Kaunas, I stopped on the way, this was somewhere about more than halfway from Lvov to Kaunas, I stopped on the way at my parents' house. And because my wife was pregnant, and my mother didn't know it, so she persuaded me to let her stay until she'll have the child and then she'll come to me to Kaunas. I left immediately because I had to be there at work, and this is the last time I saw her.

In general, I went to Kaunas and started my work. It was, in the beginning it was a lot of commotion and disorder, in particular under the Russians in a new enterprise; but it was, I would say, the same like any other new enterprise, and I worked there until the beginning of the war.

The evening before the war started my wife called me on the phone and told me, "Oh, everything is dark in Bialystok and they say the war started." And I simply said, "Oh, they are saying it for two years since the Russians, since the war started in Poland in September." "No, but this time I am serious." I'm making a joke and she asked me even, "To send some goods to your parents because they started to complain they don't have enough food and they asked for chocolate." Not for them, but with chocolate they could get other food that they needed and they change it with the Germans. Oh, this

was on the 21st of June, 1941, and this is the last time I talked to her.

Q: DO YOU KNOW WHAT HAPPENED?

A: I know they all perished. As a matter of fact my brother--and there was my grandmother, who died before the war, but my two parents, my brother, and there was his wife's sister, and there was another lady, no trace.

I was in Bialystok later in 1960. I planned to stay several days, I couldn't wing it. I stayed one night. I thought I connot stay in this town, and I didn't find anybody that I recognized in the entire city. Just one person that I recognized was the janitor of our house. Basically she recognized me because I came to see what happened to the house.

It's not a house, it was--we rented, we were renters. It was a building. It had, I think, about four tenants. Two-story building, a brick building. This building was already torn down and they planned to build something else, so I couldn't find anything. But because I was going around the yard looking at it all, she came out and asked me, do you know I think you were there and there. She's the only person I recognized in Bialystok who was not Jewish.

Q: DID SHE KNOW WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO YOUR FAMILY?

A: She couldn't know because the house was already in, like the Polish section of the town, and my family had to move out. I don't know, it was about three or four months later they moved out to the Jewish ghetto, where I understand only from, I had a cousin who survived the ghetto and who survived Auschwitz. But the cousin knows only a little what happened, and they told me where they lived, which I know because it was a cousin of ours who had a larger house and they moved from our place to his house, and they

survived until 1943. But what happened to them, I don't know.

Q: SO, TELL ME MORE. NOW YOU ARE IN YOUR NEW JOB IN THE MARGARINE AND OIL FACTORY?

A: Uh-huh.

Q: AND HOW WAS IT?

A: Basically we still didn't have any production. It was still under construction, but I have to advise the builders what are the requirements for this kind of factory. Discuss with them the blueprints and everything. So this was my job. But we didn't start production, it was--they planned to have it in two years.

Q: HOW LONG WERE YOU IN THAT JOB?

A: Oh, until the war started.

Q: AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

A: Then I stayed--the war started on the 21st, I stayed until the 23rd. Nobody came to work, and I saw the entire city was bombed. The airport, everything; so there wasn't any reason for me to linger there, and I didn't have any roots there. I decided to go back to Bialystok. I didn't know how the situation in Bialystok. I tried to make a phone, there was no phones, nothing. Everything was already inoperable.

In the evening I boarded a train from Kaunas to Vilnius, but we didn't make it to Vilnius. The tracks were already torn, and the train couldn't pass. The rest of the road I made on foot. I came close to Vilnius, and Vilnius was already entirely on fire. But from Vilnius I had to make a right turn to go south to Bialystok, and I started in this way.

Then I see a Russian Army in disarray. Some with weapons, some without weapons. I wanted to go back. And they started, "Where are you going? The Germans are already there."

No, I thought indeed that it doesn't make any sense for me to enter the Nazis there and be under the Nazis. And I started to go together with the Russian Army.

For sure on the border we stopped. I thought the Russians will stop them, but I came to the border, the city of Minsk which is close to the border. When we came the city was still okay, intact. In the morning we got up, the city was on fire. And most of the men, some with families and all, went--in Minsk there is a big freeway that leads to Moscow, and most of the people in the army were going this way toward Moscow, and I started the same way. This way I started my exile to Russia.

Q: THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

A: We were--one thing we have to say, sure food was very scarce, but whenever we stopped and there were peasants, Russian peasants, they used to feed us. Sure mainly bread. So I couldn't say that they were antisemetic.

It was all--I'm certain they recognized that we are Jewish, but the Russians as well as the Poles could recognize a Jew immediately because they are, the Poles are even more monolithic. They are 92 percent Poles you see, so they can recognize immediately. And the same, well the situation in this part of Russia, White Russia; but they used to bring sometimes milk if they had, you know.

But basically, we stopped in some, I forgot the smaller ones, but the larger town was Smolensk. In Smolensk there was already a committee formed

by the Russians. They took us from the station to some kind of cafeteria and gave us something like a meal. The best meal that they had. I also had to go to the military induction center there because it's already--the first city that had lights in the night was Smolensk. And there they looked at my documents was all checked, and they told me that I cannot go to Moscow because Moscow is a city off limits to refugees.

They gave us tickets, not tickets, they simply gave us papers so we can travel, and I traveled to [illegible], which is southeast of Moscow.

Q: WHEN DID YOU ARRIVE THERE?

A: Oh, it took several days. Maybe a week or so.

Q: WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU GOT THERE?

A: There they put us in a collective farm. But it was all temporary. In the collective farm the same, I remember the first time for maybe two weeks that the collective farm gave us meat. I remember the peasants living there resented the fact that we are given meat because they didn't see meat for a long time. So this is the reason I say I didn't see, I was very sensitive to the discrimination, to real discrimination, and I never saw discrimination in Russia of this type that I saw in Poland.

Q: NOW, YOU WORKED ON THE FARM FOR HOW LONG?

A: Not very long because I was called to the induction center in the city from the collective farm. There in the induction center they gave me an assignment to go toward Kiev. Kiev at that time was forming a front to assist the Germans.

No, immediately, maybe in a week or so I left with the army towards Kiev. And what happened on the way, Stalin decided not to have western

born people in the army, in the active army. There was an executive order from Stalin to remove all these people, which involved Poles from Western Ukraine and Ukrainians from Western Ukraine and Jews or so, to remove them and send them to a labor army.

So immediately they took us all together and shipped us to Central Asia where they needed labor because they evacuated many. A lot of machinery, equipment was all from Western Ukraine to Central Asia to be able to operate because they expected a long war, which it was indeed a long war.

So I was transfered to the north of Alma-Ata. Alma-Ata is the capital of Kazakh. When I came there we were involved in the labor army. No, we, most of the work we did on construction. Digging foundations because they had very primitive equipment, mainly with shovels or so, for the future factories. Certain things we simply had to correct it and make it suitable for the factories, and so we took--I worked there about three months on this job.

Then what happened, they had a tremendous cannery, a very large cannery, in Alma-Ata because the area is rich in fruit and vegetables. The technical manager of the cannery in Alma-Ata, he was a member of the Communist Party. When the war started he volunteered to go to the front, so he left. Then they started to search for somebody to replace him and then in my documents was that I was in nutritional science and I graduated from Lvov Polytechnic Institute, and I worked on this and this job; and they sent me from the labor army to work in this cannery.

For sure they had several other people working in the same area. They

had trucks we used to travel in trucks, and they used to bring us there. The cannery used to pay me full payment, but the money had to go to the labor army. They used to give me a better allowance so I can, if I have to do something, better clothing or so, but the basic salary used to go to the labor army. This is with all the, even a doctor if he worked he had to go, had to give, the money had to be paid to the labor army; and we used to get something for this.

But there I worked there almost a year and then started--in each enterprise in Russia, they have cells of the MGB. They watch everybody so everything will be nice and so nobody violates and nobody speaks anti-Soviet expressions or so. In the beginning I had a very slight idea about this because I was involved in my work and never thought about this.

Then suddenly I was called to the office, it was part of the personnel office. I came there and the manager said, "The guy is not here, and would you come later?" He told me what time to come. No, I felt something was wrong because they already started arrests of western people in Russia at that time. In the same city there were previous arrests, but I couldn't understand why they would take me.

Q: WHY WERE THE ARRESTS STARTED? THE RUSSIANS ARRESTED PEOPLE?

A: The Russians arrested people.

Q: TO DO WHAT OR WHY?

A: First of all, they arrested, there were a double purpose. First of all, they needed young people to work in the camps for example. And it's cheap labor, they don't ask you whether you want to go or not because as a free person you don't have to go in Russia.

Secondly, they simply tried to eliminate maybe anti-Soviet activities in the population. I assume they didn't trust Poles who came out, at that time they released all the Poles from the camps and let them go. Many of them were officers in the Polish Army, so I assume some of them did some spying. And they had contacted London because they had a legation which is like a consulate in Alma-Ata and Tashkent and then in Frunze is another capital of Soviet Republic. I am certain they found something. I worked a little on this and I know that they found some briefcase with some documents that an officer left.

And there is another reason, a third reason. They were dissatisfied with the army formed by the people who came out from the camps because this army said they won't fight with the Russians. They can go only out to Great Britain, to France, this type of thing.

This was a serious problem, and they decided by arresting more people they'll have all three purposes together. What they wanted, they wanted first of all, to cut off relations with the Polish Government in London. They had with them an agreement in order to cut off they needed good reasons so they found I assume their material because finally in '40-at the end of '42 they severed their relations with the government in London. They formed their own Polish Government and their own Polish Army, which later took part in the liberation of Poland.

So there was a lot of politics involved and there were labor problems and so. Because most of these people didn't, even if they're young and able-bodied, but most of them Stalin didn't want in the army. They feel that they may defect because I assume they had some defections in the

first days of the war.

So in this way they achieved their goal and severed their relations with London Government and started relations with an internal Polish Government, formed by the Russians. They took several Poles who were of some respected people and they made them part of the government.

Q: WHEN YOU WERE CALLED TO THE OFFICE AND THEN TOLD TO WAIT, WHAT HAPPENED?

A: No, I was told to come later, but I didn't come back. I talked to some people who, I heard that this man and this man was arrested; and I didn't stay overnight in my house.

But in order to run away I needed some money because you had to bribe a driver of a truck, or what, who goes to another republic. If I would go to another republic, if I would succeed, then they wouldn't look for me because I wasn't important to them. They wouldn't make all the union search for me.

But I was foolish enough for sure, and for this you pay the price. I came to pick up money from the place where I worked; and the moment I approached the cashier, I assume they were warned already, they immediately called the office and they came out to me and stopped me. Then two men in a car, two MGB men came, they parked the car close to me and identified them, that they are MGB employees; and asked me to go with them for identification and clarification to their office. And for sure you couldn't do anything else, you know.

I went with them. They brought me, this was the internal prison in Alma-Ata which is mainly for political prisoners. And there I was--after

identification and signing the papers and so, even they didn't present the accusation that they have. I asked them, they said, oh, this will come later, and I was put in prison.

Q: HOW LONG WERE YOU THERE?

A: I was in prison about 11 months.

Q: WHAT WAS IT LIKE IN PRISON? WHAT HAPPENED? THE FIRST DAY WHAT DID THEY DO?

A: Oh, I was--the first several days I was, they put me in a hot chamber. It was under the bathroom that they had, you know, for the prisoners, so it was very hot. And this is simply, they do this in order to exhaust you. I was completely undressed and I was sweating, and sweating, and sweating until I got completely exhausted and fell asleep.

They watch you all the time so you wouldn't go, you don't commit suicide or something like this. There is a special guard who opens the, there is a small circular eye you can see what is going on in the room. And I was alone. Then after three or four days they saw that I'm already completely adjusted to their needs. They let me out and brought me to a solitary cell. I was alone and the investigation started.

For sure I didn't eat the bread. I couldn't eat anything at all. They told be to take the bread with me, and I took it with me to the cell, which was very important for the bread was the only source of nutrition. They used to give you some water with soup or so, which was meaningless.

And there I was six months under investigation in solitary cell. And five months I waited for my, for my trial which never occurred.

Q: IN SOLITARY CELL, WHAT WAS THAT LIKE?

A: I had a bed which was embedded in the floor, in the cement floor. You couldn't move it. There was some window underneath the ceiling, small window, you couldn't see anything. You had maybe, light about three or four hours a day even if it was in May. There they watch you all the time.

The main thing, the most harassing thing was the investigation, the interrogation.

Q: WHAT WERE THEY LIKE?

A: Oh, they used to take me about 10:00 in the morning and return 5:00 in the afternoon. This used to take me to the investigator. Then 10:00 in the night until 5:00 in the morning. So I never could sleep enough, and you get exhausted; and you come to this kind of a situation that you don't care what you'll be, only let me sleep, let me eat a normal meal.

For the six months I never had a hot meal. Even they bring the soup hot, and they put it, you know, in the cell, but it gets cold completely. When you come you have to eat it cold. Nobody will warm it up, they didn't have any microwave ovens at that time.

Q: WHAT DID THEY DO IN THE INVESTIGATIONS? WHAT WENT ON?

A: The main thing, you see they didn't have any material on me. I had some friends who were arrested together with me, one was my brother-in-law. Each of them said something which mainly--I was the only person in, it was a group of four they made it. They make it in groups. I was accused of, in the beginning, of being a spy, contra-revolution, and group contra-revolution. There was a separate, what do you call it? Separate--

Q: ACCUSATION? CATEGORY?

A: No. They have a word for this in English; accusation but each of them had a paragraph in the code. So it was separate paragraphs, and it was three paragraphs like this.

For sure I tried to debate with him. Most of the time he let me sit, but very narrow chairs so you couldn't fall asleep. If you fell asleep you would fall down.

And in the morning and in the evening you are so exhausted you are willing to do everything that they want you to sign, but I resisted a long time because I felt, not I felt, I thought if I'll resist they may let me go, which was foolish. If I would not resist and sign immediately I would go through less suffering with the same results.

Q: SO WHAT HAPPENED?

A: At that time, it turns out because they didn't have any hard evidence, my case didn't go to a trial, to court. It was decided by an administrative committee that they had in each republic. They simply signed what, the papers that they got from the prosecution. And this was, they gave me ten years in prison, in camps, and five years in exile.

Q: FOR WHAT CRIME?

A: They dropped spying, they dropped--but they left group contra-revolution and contra-revolution, the two. Which wasn't--they did a favor for me, they--the person that, the warden told me, you are lucky because according to this, during wartime you deserve the death sentence. So this is okay. I was indeed glad that I avoided it.

Q: THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

A: I was taken to prison. From the prison I was taken with maybe

about 300 people or so. We had to carry our things on our backs. We were taken to the railroad station. At the railroad station there they packed us in, they call it, special compartments. The train itself is called, I forgot the name of it, it was a minister . He invented this kind of train for prisoners that they shipped to Siberia and other places.

But what happened, he designed it for six prisoners and they packed us, we are about 26-27 people in the compartment. You couldn't move. You couldn't sleep. If you wanted to change your position, everybody had to change positions, this type of thing. In this way we traveled to south of Tashkent. There was a camp , but this was only temporary. They didn't tell us where they are taking us.

But there, coming to this camp, people told us, oh, you are here, they'll take you some other place. And there I was maybe a month, a month and a half. They used us for light work. Cleaning the yards and this type of thing.

Then--but with bread was bad. Because after the prisoners being hungry almost the entire year, we could eat without limit and live. And there wasn't, because they give us the normal portion for this type, they call it a transit camp, we used to get about a pound of bread a day, and this was all. The rest was a little watery soup or so, and we could eat maybe five pounds, but we overcame.

We dreamed about going to the camps where it will be better. At least you have freedom to move around within the limits of the camp. Within about a month and a half or so, the train came and they took us to a camp called

which is the western part of . It was about several hundred miles, but it took about three days to travel there by train. And the same conditions that we had before in the compartments. The same packed like sardines.

The only food was the bread. They used to give you some dried herring, but you couldn't eat it because you would become thirsty and water they gave you only once a day and only a cup of water. So it was, we had to be careful. Some people used to cry and so because they wanted to drink, and no water, only once a day. But you learn with time how to behave, how to do things in order to avoid the problem. Later I was in many other, they call it shipments, and I used to throw out the herring. I used to give it to somebody because I knew that if I'll eat herring I'll later die from thirst.

Anyway, I came to Aktyubinsk and there we went a month. We are in quarantine, which the same, they used us for some type of work. It was already winter. It was in, I don't remember, it was already winter in September or October; there the winter starts early. So they used to ask us to clean the snow or to collect fuel for the kitchen, this type of work.

In quarantine, it is simply to avoid epidemics because the prisoners came from different parts of Russia, and some of them maybe with typhoid or so. During the war there was a lot of typhoid in Russia.

And there I came and we started, after the quarantine we went to the regular zone where we lived in barracks. The barracks were about, maybe 60 yards in length, maybe about 25 or 30 in width. They had continuous boards--so everybody--and in two layers so where it's possible to put,

some people tried the lower one because they had difficulty climbing. If somebody was younger, they used to go on the top because there it's warmer a little. There was no heating except in the evenings they used to, they had some kind of a small stove made of clay; and some people used to dry their shoes or so. And there I worked almost a year.

There was many other things because I was maybe in about 12 places during my ten years of confinement. In the beginning I was on general labor until 1947; which meant I used to do any type of work. I used to--on construction and digging foundations. I was--they used to take us to, in agriculture to harvest if they needed people. This type of work.

Q: WHAT WAS YOUR LIFE LIKE IN THESE CAMPS?

A: Camps was very--my life, I'll tell you what my thoughts were. My thoughts were all the time concentrated on bread. If I could get a piece of bread to steal it, to grab it or so, without abusing anybody, I didn't abuse anybody; but from grabbing it I used to do it. But everything involved a certain danger because let's say if you see a tomato lying on the road where they lead you to work, and you used to jump out to catch it. The guard would kick you with his boot and this may be very dangerous. It may kill you or knock off your kidneys or something like this. So everything involved--but only younger people could do this and I was lucky I was young enough at that time.

But it was a very hard life until '47. And why was it? Because all the better jobs in the camps were taken by the people who are arrested in '37. They had a special way for arrest in '37. In '47 most of these people went free. They were released, although most of them remained

around the camps, but they are all free employees. Then vacancies opened and because of my background I was offered in the beginning as a tractor driver; which already improved my situation because I was free to go into the field. Also in the beginning I was still, even if I went to the field there was two guards who used to guard us even though the field was very large.

Then a year later I was appointed, like, technician for plant protection, which they consider this something related to my field. It was a little related because we had some plant protection at school. I worked on this job on the plant protection I worked almost until I was released in 1952.

Q: NOW, THE WAR ENDED IN '45?

A: '45, yes.

Q: HOW DID THAT AFFECT YOU?

A: You see, I don't know. Maybe it was unlucky and lucky at the same time because the situation was all, in the beginning during the war until '45, we thought, oh, the war will end. We'll get amnesty. Indeed there were several amnesties in Russia, but mainly the amnesties came for the deserters and for criminals; not for political prisoners. So, and then everybody expected, all, we'll relent. We'll have a great amnesty, so all the time rumors like this were coming to the camps, you know by word of mouth.

Then also came the problem of Polish exresidents. They said, oh, they'll let them go because they had some agreement, the Polish Government and Russian Government. And indeed they started to release some people, but mainly people who were involved in, like, thiefs, or

criminals, embezzlers, but not politicals.

In Russia, you know I was deep in Central Asia. They say that most of the people in my category in European Russia were released from the camps and went to Poland. But not me because until it came to us, they were already changed the situation, changed the rules. So I stayed there to the end. Exactly ten years to the day, even a day later because they didn't have a guard to take me back to the station to release me.

But I had another problem. You see it was ten years and five years in exile. I came to the station and they had to give me my passport because I was all the years without a passport. There I got a passport with limitations. I couldn't live in I think it was 39 major cities in the Soviet Union, which is stamped in the passport. When anybody would ask me for the passport and there each policeman, each MGB man can ask me; he knows immediately my background.

And so I took the passport and I made a selection. They gave me a selection in, deeper in Siberia. Because they offered me something in the Euros, but I knew there the farther west I'll go, the harder it will be for me. I'll have more discrimination as an exprisoner. So I decided to go where most of the people are exprisoners.

I went to, close to Yakutsk, a city , which was a new city built by prisoners. They started to build some industry which is auxiliary to atomic energy. I went there and I settled there. I had difficulties in the beginning, but I settled there.

I had to come to the commander and tell him that I'm here. He used to watch me, what I'm doing. Each time I wanted to travel, let's say I

had two weeks vacation, I had to come and tell him that I'm leaving on vacation. They used to give me some papers. Without this if they would stop me somewhere else, they would arrest me again. I tried to avoid it. In this way I was, spent almost until 1957.

But the main problem was in '53 Stalin died, which turned out for me the happiest day of my life in Russia because I knew things will change. What happened in, during Stalin's time, even I felt I'm innocent. In the beginning I wrote and asked for a revision of my case because I didn't have a trial.

And I got in about several months, three or four months, I got the reply that your case was reviewed and left without change. Then people told me, you are crazy you are writing this because you are lucky, now the first time; because most of the people who asked for revision of the case their sentence is increased. What happened for example, if somebody from the ten years he was there already two and a half years and you asked for this kind of revision, they add the two and a half years back to you. You have a new ten years. So then after this, I didn't apply at all.

This is the reason Stalin's death was a tremendous spiritual satisfaction, and I knew that now I can do what I planned to do. Things will change, it couldn't be the same. Immediately after I applied for a revision of my case, it took them a long time, but at the end of '56 I was exonerated; which means they gave me a document that I was arrested without any reason, and so and so. No apology, but this is what they gave me. With this I could go--they drove me to the police station and they changed my passport. They removed the 39 paragraph that they had there, so now I had a

clean passport.

Being in exile as long as I had the 39, I couldn't work in my field because in the camps I worked, but outside I couldn't work. I worked as a steward loading machinery and equipment that they bought from East Germany there and they tried to install it in this area in factories. But they had a rule that if somebody has a political paragraph, they couldn't trust them in the food industry. They may poison somebody. What they didn't give any reason, anyway this was the rules. So until the time I was exonerated I couldn't work in my field.

The problem is, in the camps when I worked as plant protection technician they used to trust me. We had locust in Central Asia a lot. In the beginning I had arsenic in powder and in liquid form. We used it because we had to combat the locust not to cause, the least damage possible by the locust. Then we , and everything was in my possession. I was living in a small underground, small house. One section was where I lived and the other section I had all the minerals and poisons. So this is okay there, but outside I couldn't work until I was exonerated.

After exoneration I moved over to Karaganda. There is a place there I spent originally in the camps. There they sent me, the central committe of the party I went to, the central committee and they referred me to this was a freezer. They used to freeze butter, all kinds of products. They gave me a job according to my background in this. So they had some canning of fish, meat. They didn't have any vegetables, but this was the job that I got before I left.

I stayed on the job maybe six or seven months, but at the same time

I applied for permission to leave Russia. They had an agreement, the Polish Government with the Russian Government, that anybody who was born on the territory of Poland has the right to repatriate, but I couldn't do it before because I was imprisoned and I didn't have full civil rights. This is a very strange arrangement, but the moment I got my clean passport I was eligible and I submitted this. It took a while until I got a permission, and in 19-at the end of 1959 I moved out from Russia to Warsaw.

Q: THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

A: Then I stayed in Warsaw about almost a year. They gave me a job in Warsaw. In Warsaw it was already, it was free to do everything, to talk everything. I could sell everything, and buy, I bought certain things from in Russia, minor things; but I saw that in Warsaw officially, and this improved my income. But even I was on a good job, but the income was very low.

Q: WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO LEAVE WARSAW?

A: Warsaw--one thing let me say that when I went from Russia to Poland, under one condition that I'll be able to leave Poland. Because it was in my mind, nobody, I didn't put the conditions to anybody, but I dreamed about this. That I'll be able to leave because my life in Poland and in Warsaw was, I would say, terrible to compare with these conditions here and so.

Secondly, I felt that the Poles, the Communism is there artificially. There Communism relies and rests only on the Russian power. So I thought if I go to Poland and I failed to leave Poland, I'll go back to Russia.

Q: THEN WHAT HAPPENED?

A: In Poland I didn't, one thing which is very interesting, I tried to communicate with the world, but none of the letters reached anybody mainly in Argentina, America, Israel. One letter that I wrote before I was arrested in '42 reached my aunt in Buenos Aires, so they knew that I'm alive. But from 1942 until 1959 so many years they thought I perished or what during the war. They didn't know and I didn't write anything about the war in '42. So they considered me dead.

When I traveled to Israel in '71, the first time I traveled to Israel I came to look for some friends. I tried maybe to find some information about my wife, or so, and I went to [illegible]. They had an office for [illegible], which is, I went there and gave them several names and they asked me my name and so, okay. They found some information with the same name like my wife, but it turned out later that it was a different lady from another town in Poland. So obviously the person to be sure that this is not it, but then they pulled out a--listen, you are dead. Because somebody from my family when the [illegible] opened and they submitted all the names that they thought are dead in the family and my name was included. So they gave me the document for civilian, this was it.

From Poland I simply found relatives. In the first day in Poland I was in contact with almost everybody I knew from the family. One thing, I didn't have any notebooks or so, you weren't allowed to, but I had a good memory at that time and I remembered the addresses of most of the people because my parents used to write. They were not very fluent in Polish, mainly in Yiddish or Russian, so I used to write the addresses. My mother was a tremendous correspondent. She used to write letters

five, six pages. One to everybody. She had contact with the entire family. I remembered old addresses and I started to write to them.

For sure most of the people perished, but some of them in Israel survived and they gave me the addresses of all the other people. And by in, maybe in two or three weeks, I was in contact with everybody.

Q: WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO COME TO AMERICA?

A: It was my dream at that time that I didn't stay in Poland. To Israel at that time I was already close to 50. I didn't think it's any good reason to start a life there, so I decided if I cannot go to America I would go to Argentina where I had some relatives. I wrote to them, they said the time is not good and so on, antisemetic.

Then finally, I have a cousin in Paris. He found out that I'm alive and he was in the camps in Russia too, but he was a shorter period of time, he was in Lithuania. He sent a ticket for me to come to visit. So I went to Paris. And being there, I call it, I have a colleague of mine from university who survived too, and he is in New York, and a great man now, so I contacted him.

He started to advise me, come to America, but I didn't have any visa. So he sent me money for the trip. For a round trip because I couldn't go otherwise, and he said, you'll see maybe you'll stay here. Indeed on this instigation and encouragement I went to, in Paris to the American Embassy and to the Polish Embassy and they permitted me to go.

This way I came to America. I looked around for about two or three months without knowing the language. It wasn't too difficult, but I came in about three months I started work.

Q: WHERE?

A: My first job was in Chicago.

Q: DOING WHAT?

A: I got in my field. In Chicago I didn't know all the arrangements, but I simply tried in the beginning to the Jewish Community Center in Chicago.

It was terrible because in my case in order to work, I had to have a statement from an employer to immigration office to let me stay. I went to several Jewish employers, including Sara Lee, but when I came to the problem to file with the immigration office they refused to accept me. And when I saw I won't, I won't succeed with them, then someone advised me to go to the Chemical Society in Chicago.

I went to the Chemical Society. They gave me a list of jobs available in the city. I didn't have transportation and so. I started to work every day until I found somebody who was Irish. I had problems communicating with him, but I was learned already to write English during this time. So what he couldn't understand what I say, then I used to write it out.

I don't know what happened, but he decided to hire me and he wrote a tremendous letter to the immigration office. In about a month, a month and a half, I went to the specialty school until I got the right to be a resident.

Q: THEN WHAT? DID YOU STAY THERE FOR A LONG TIME?

A: I stayed a year. With him a year and several months. Then I saw--this was a bakery supplier, and I didn't see any future there. See, I would be glad if this was happening to me in Russia, but now I saw an open

world and I decided to look farther.

I contacted several universities. Then I submitted my papers to Berkeley, in nutritional science, but I didn't have any idea that I'll be admitted. Finally one day I got a telegram to come. They admitted me to a PhD program in nutritional science department.

I traveled--I went to my boss. I told him the story and he was a nice guy in this respect, he said, "Under these circumstances for sure I don't have the right to stop you." And he let me go. I came to Berkeley. There I started my program, the PhD program in nutritional science.

But what happened, I was already close to 50 and all the others were youngsters, 25--26. In the beginning I had the advantage because I had tremendous practice, but when it came to new things, particularly in physical chemistry and biochemistry and so, I felt that I'm failing.

So I developed special methods how to study, because there the exams are very strict. They give you more questions than anybody could answer. You are graded on the basis of a scale who answers better and more questions. So then I had to change my entire way of studying and so, and I succeeded, but it was tremendous strain and it affected my health.

I started '62 in Berkeley. In '63 I got a degree in, my master's in Berkeley in nutritional science, but this was on the way to the PhD. I continued my PhD program and in '64, in May, I suffered a severe heart attack.

This was a tremendous setback to me because the doctor and I felt I cannot continue like this. It's too much strain for me. One thing that Berkely did, this happened in May but I had my assistantship. I was an assistant, assistantship until October, until the new year started.

Then I didn't know what to do with myself. I started translations from Russian, which wasn't very good. Not because of the Russian is not good, but because my English was bad. You needed more English than Russian.

Somebody advised me, this was a friend of mine, his wife was a librarian, he advised me to go to library school. I went, I switched my papers from nutritional science to the library school in Berkeley. I got my degree, my master's in Librarian studies in Berkeley. There it took almost the normal time because library school is not hard to study. Even with my handicap.

I got my degree in a year and a quarter which was normal. The jobs at that time used to wait for you so I immediately got a job at State College in

Q: AND YOU'VE BEEN THERE FOR--

A: Twenty-two years.

Q: INCREDIBLE.

A: No, but during this time I did some work first of all in sciences. I was the science librarian there, but also I published a two volume Russian Slang Dictionary based on the camps, which came out in '72. Then in '78 the second one.

Q: IN WHAT LANGUAGE?

A: Oh, this is Russian, English. No, it is Russian-English bilingual.

Q: IS THERE A COPY OF IT HERE?

A: I don't think so.

Q: THERE SHOULD BE A COPY HERE. WE SHOULD BUY A COPY.

WELL, WHILE YOU WERE IN THE CAMPS AND AFTER THE WAR WAS THERE ANYTHING WHAT KEPT YOU GOING? WHAT KEPT YOU GOING?

A: You see, I left Poland and even it was, it was a semi-democratic country. It got worse in the 30's as I mentioned, but I had the vision of this life, of a free life in Poland and I had to compare it in Russia. Also I couldn't complain about discrimination, but there you could do anything, you see. The Jewish people and so there were no limitations. You wanted to go and be a pious man, go to synagogue or so.

There was no limitation wherein Russia, I would say except twice on Yom Kippur, I didn't go to any synagogue. Even there was a synagogue in Yakutsk; which was a synagogue, old synagogue but they made, they took away the lower, the main floor they took away as a dormitory for students. The upper floor they made for man and woman together.

So, but I had to travel about 30 miles which was, I didn't have a car to go there so this is the reason I went not too often. But I went on Yom Kippur I used to go because basically they considered that the people in Bialystok were perished in the fall of '43, which is close to Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur they had a memorial service. So simply I used to go there for the memorial service in Yakutsk. But my town was about 30-35 miles north of Yakutsk.

Q: HOW DO YOU FEEL THAT YOUR EXPERIENCE HAS CHANGED THE WAY YOU LIVE OR CHANGED THE WAY YOU SEE LIFE?

A: This is for sure it changed a lot because I felt, I'm less greedy in money or so, because I saw that money wasn't any good at all. Because in the camps some people thought they had something, good clothing or so, they used to sell it for four hundred gram of bread. So it is, yes.

Q: YOUR LIFE NOW, WHAT DOES ISRAEL MEAN TO YOU? DO YOU HAVE ANY

FEELINGS TOWARDS ISRAEL?

A: I have feelings, yes. Which is part of it I have a lot of friends there. When I came in '71 they offered me a job in my field, but I felt I couldn't contribute too much to Israel with my health and after the heart attack. It would be only a burden and I didn't feel I should do it.

Q: WHAT ABOUT YOUR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AFTER ALL THAT YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH DO YOU, HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT JUDAISM? HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT GOD?

A: You see, I feel there is somebody who will watch us and all, the world and manages the world. I am very familiar with all the religious books and so and that I studied as a child, but I'm not the religious man that observes everything.

Q: I THINK THAT'S ALL THE QUESTIONS I HAVE. MAYER, IS THERE ANYTHING THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SAY TO PEOPLE?

A: It's very unfortunate that our generation had to be in the place at a time when this all happened because this was almost unavoidable. The problems and the descrimination and the extermination that occurred in Central Europe.

Simply I think the basic thing we should be careful and watchful so it won't happen again. I think exposing everything and documenting all these facts in cases may convince people about the reality of all these occurances. It is not fiction that some people try to make it, but it was real.

Q: WELL, MAYER, THANK YOU. THANK YOU VERY MUCH. THIS INTERVIEW WILL BE A GREAT CONTRIBUTION, REALLY.

A: Okay, thank you.