

Interview with ALFRED VIRSKI

Holocaust Oral History Project

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Q TODAY IS THE 10th OF JULY, 1990. I'M EVELYN
FIELDEN, AN INTERVIEWER FOR THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF
NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. TODAY I'M HERE WITH ALFRED VIRSKI.

GOOD MORNING, ALFRED.

A Good morning.

Q WITH ME IS RON REISSBERG, WHO IS AN ASSISTANT
INTERVIEWER.

CAN YOU TELL US WHERE YOU WERE BORN, ALFRED?

A In Krakow, Poland.

Q KRAKOW, POLAND.

A Yes.

Q WHEN WAS THAT?

A That was in 1919.

Q AND DID YOU GROW UP IN KRAKOW?

A Oh, yes, very much so.

Q YOU WENT TO SCHOOL?

A I went to school and the university, yes.

Q YOUR PARENTS CAME FROM KRAKOW TOO?

A Yes, they are both from Krakow.

Q WHAT DID YOUR FATHER DO?

A My father was running a lumber concern in the south of Poland.

Q I SEE, AND YOUR MOTHER I SUPPOSE DID NOT WORK.

A My mother actually, strange enough for that period, had a PHD from Krakow University; but she did not work at the time when we were around.

Q AT THAT TIME THE WOMEN USUALLY STAYED HOME, RIGHT?

A No, she worked until we were, I mean the children, were very little and then she stopped.

Q HOW MANY BROTHERS AND SISTERS?

A There was one brother.

Q JUST ONE BROTHER, AND HE ALSO GREW UP WITH YOU?

A Yes.

Q AND YOU STAYED THERE; SO, HOW LONG DID YOU LIVE IN KRAKOW?

A Well, I lived in Krakow twenty years.

Q TWENTY YEARS. THAT WAS ALREADY THEN WHEN HITLER CAME TO POWER IN GERMANY?

A Well, Hitler came into Poland in '39, yes.

Q '39. SO, WHERE WERE YOU THEN?

A Then I was in the Polish Army.

Q WHEN DID YOU JOIN UP IN THE ARMY?

A I was a volunteer. Because of my university studies, I had a deferment from the service. But I went

through the training service; and when the war broke out, I volunteered and I was in the army.

Q WHAT DID YOU STUDY AT THE UNIVERSITY?

A Chemistry, of all things.

Q-2 ALFRED, DID MANY JEWS VOLUNTEER FOR THE POLISH ARMY, FOR THEIR LOVE OF PILSUDSKI?

A I have no idea. Pilsudski was dead since '35, don't forget about that. Forget about Pilsudski.

Q-2 HE WASN'T AROUND WHEN YOU WENT INTO THE ARMY?

A No. You see there is tremendously bad information about Poland in the last years before the war. Poland is considered by a great many Americans and particularly the American Jewish community as a very, kind of nearly fascist country, which wasn't true. Pilsudski is a bete noire of all of things, although he died in '35 and was sick by about '32; so he was out of the running. But, you know, the bad press that he and the Polish government got, one of those myths in America, the most uninformed country in the world.

Q YOU MEAN HE GOT THE BAD PRESS IN AMERICA OR IN EUROPE?

A Oh, no, in America, particularly among the American Jews. Listen, when I came to America after the war, some of the American Jews whom I had met, said, "When you were running, you Poles were running those concentration camps in Poland..." A great many people

believed that very firmly, that it was the Poles who were running the concentration camps because they happened to be on the Polish territory.

Q WERE YOU ORTHODOX? WERE YOU BROUGHT UP ORTHODOX AT HOME?

A What orthodox?

Q ORTHODOX JEWISH.

A I am not Jewish. That's what I'm trying to tell John, and you, and everybody else.

Q I'M SORRY, ALFRED, I--

A That's why I am afraid we are missing the point.

Q THAT'S ALL RIGHT, THAT'S ALL RIGHT. WE CAN CUT THAT OUT. I WAS NOT INFORMED ABOUT THAT; I JUST HAD COME IN, YOU SEE. THAT'S ALL RIGHT, WE'LL JUST GO ON THEN. THAT MAKES IT EVEN MORE INTERESTING.

A No, it really isn't because you see I am--John wouldn't listen to me and I'm trying to tell you that I'm kind of (la concurrence), as you say in French.

Q THAT'S FINE. TELL US YOUR STORY; IT'S VERY, VERY INTERESTING, BELIEVE ME, ALFRED. SO PLEASE GO ON, AND I AM PERSONALLY ALSO VERY INTERESTED.

Q-2 YOU MENTIONED THAT POLAND HAS SORT OF A BAD REPUTATION WHICH IS UNDESERVED FOR BEING FASCIST--

A Which we were not, never was.

VIRSKI--5

Q-2 --AMONGST A LOT OF AMERICAN JEWS, ESPECIALLY THE REVISIONIST ZIONISTS. PILSUDSKI AND THAT WHOLE ELEMENT IN POLAND WAS VERY ADMIRED. HOWEVER, THERE WERE, IN THE UNIVERSITIES--

A Has been admired?

Q-2 VERY ADMIRED, YES. ESPECIALLY BY BEGIN AND THE REVISIONISTS LIKE (JABATINSKY). THEY CONSIDER HIM ALMOST GOD-LIKE.

A That I don't know. You see, my first contact with this opinion, misguided opinion, was after '46 when I first came to the States. Whenever I met some people that would ask me where was I during the war and I would say, this and that and I was in the Polish Army and I was an officer in the Polish Army; and they would say, "Well, you were in the fascist army." Well, you see, we were fighting the Germans for six years.

Q-2 WHEN YOU WERE IN THE UNIVERSITY IN POLAND, DO YOU REMEMBER THERE BEING GHETTO BENCHES FOR JEWS?

A Not ghetto benches. There were, indeed, there were--the last two benches were kind of--the Jews were asked to sit in those benches.

Q-2 NOT OBLIGED?

A (Shakes head) But they didn't sit there.

Q-2 THEY DIDN'T?

A No. I had a couple of friends who were in my class who were sitting just about anywhere they wanted

to. Occasionally there was some anti-Semitic excesses run by the National Democratic Party element, but those were just happening once a year, usually for about two or three days.

Q BUT ON THE WHOLE, I THINK, THE JEWS HAVE ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT THE POLES WERE ANTI-SEMITIC; I PERSONALLY-

A Well look, I think we have to come to the end of it because I am not one to judge it, you know; and I am very much disturbed by the whole thing. I mean, if you ask about who is the most anti-Semitic of all nations, it would be a very hard thing to figure it out. There is a lot of anti-Semitism in this country, isn't there?

Q RIGHT. NO, I JUST WANTED TO--

A Is there or is there not?

Q I THINK THERE IS ANTI-SEMITISM ALL OVER.

A Then I say why, why to concentrate always on Poland?

Q IT'S JUST THAT THERE HAS BEEN THIS SORT OF, MAYBE YOU CAN CALL IT A RUMOR THAT HAS BEEN GOING AROUND.

A Oh, it's not a rumor. I'm not saying there wasn't anti-Semitism in Poland; there was. I mean all of Central and Eastern Europe was permeated with anti-Semitic sentiments. Take Russia, which is today's darling of the Western World, the worst anti-Semites that ever existed, and are today and will be tomorrow.

In fact, with the kind of loosening of authority, such as it was, abhorrent as it was, there will be more and more of it. Well, you know it better than I do. But the Jews are running from Russia now like crazy, right?

Q WHEN YOU GREW UP, DID YOU COME IN CONTACT WITH A LOT OF JEWISH CHILDREN IN THE SCHOOLS, IN THE UNIVERSITIES?

A I have quite a few Jewish friends, some of them even very close ones, you know. I kept with some of them throughout the years, even until today. Look, but I am not a specialist on the Jewish question in Poland.

Q-3 LET'S TALK ABOUT--

Q IT DOESN'T MATTER--

A No, it does, really. I--

Q WE WILL NOT TOUCH THAT SUBJECT.

A No, no. It's not that I'm sensitive about it. But that's what I was trying to say, it misses the point. I am, as I said before, ("la concurrence").

Q WELL, YOU ARE HERE TO TELL US YOUR STORY, SO WHY DON'T YOU TELL US YOUR STORY. WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU JOINED UP, WHEN YOU JOINED THE POLISH ARMY? WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THAT, AFTER YOU JOINED?

A Well, there's a very long story. It would take forever, and we don't have time for that.

We were destroyed by the Germans very shortly, very quickly, as you know. I moved from one group of the

army to the other until we were destroyed to the point that the Russians came from the other side and I was taken prisoner by the Russians, from which I escaped; and that was the end of my campaign in 1939. Poland was divided between foes, Mr. Hitler and Mr. Stalin.

What else do we want to say?

Q WELL, WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU WERE TAKEN PRISONER BY THE RUSSIANS?

A Then I escaped from them. I escaped from the P.O.W. camp and came to the city which was, which I knew very well, which wasn't my city, wasn't Krakow. It was Lwow, in the eastern part of Poland, which was under Soviet occupation at that time, which was being Sovietized overnight, you know. I worked there, for lack of anything else, as a truck driver. I kept about fifteen people from what I was making.

Then the Russians took me to the Red Army. There was no way to get out of it, so I had to go. Especially as I had my father with me at that time, who was not terribly well. If you, for instance, tried to escape from the call to arms, the family would be locked up.

I spent, as I said, about two years in the Red Army trying to keep alive; and other than that, I was wounded three times during the war. Then I finally got out of it; I escaped from the Red Army and joined the Polish Army on the Russian territory, the Polish Free Army.

Q HOW DID YOU ESCAPE?

A Just escaped from the hospital where I was treated after being wounded the third time. It was deserted, you know.

Q YOU SPOKE RUSSIAN FLUENTLY?

A By that time I spoke Russian practically without any accent. Although for us Poles the Russian is easier on one hand, but the accent is very difficult because there are certain vowels that we cannot pronounce the way they do; but I still spoke rather good Russian.

Then I was, for the next five years, in the Free Polish Army, and we got reorganized. We got evacuated, luckily, out of Russia into first Iran and then Iraq and then what was at that time Palestine. Then we took part in the end of the Egyptian campaign around Tobruk, then El Alamein. Then we went on to the invasion of Sicily, and we spent the next nearly three years in the Italian campaign, which ended by May of '45.

Q WERE YOU ATTACHED TO ANOTHER UNIT, OR DID YOU FIGHT WITH THE BRITISH, OR--

A We were the Independent Polish Corps, which was about 100,000 strong. We were an integral part of the British 8th Army, but we wore Polish uniforms and Polish insignia and everything else.

Q SO HOW MANY MEN WERE THERE?

A About 105,000.

Q FOR FIVE YEARS?

A Well, it started in '42 and it ended, actually I came out of the army in '46, so it's four and a half years, yes.

Q WHAT DID YOU DO THEN?

A Then I finished my studies at the University of Rome, and then I, luckily, came to the States as my brother was here already. And here I am. That was 45 years ago, wasn't it; no, not quite.

I worked for the last 43 years. I worked in a number of large corporations, General Foods Corporation, a textile corporation; and then I worked on my own. I am now retired and I live in San Francisco.

Q HAVE YOU BEEN BACK TO POLAND?

A No, I have not.

Q DO YOU WANT TO GO BACK?

A I might go back now; on a visit you mean?

Q YES, SURE.

A I might go now in view of what has happened, what has transpired; but I'm not quite ready yet. I mean there's still a lot of unanswered questions there.

Q I UNDERSTAND YOU HAVE WRITTEN A BOOK.

A Yes, I have.

Q CAN YOU TELL US THE TITLE?

A It's called My Life In The Red Army.

Q WHEN DID YOU WRITE THAT?

A It was published in '49.

Q WOULD YOU LIKE TO TELL US A LITTLE BIT WHY YOU WROTE THAT BOOK; WHAT MOTIVATED YOU?

A I didn't think of writing a book about it; but when I got to New York, I had a few American friends who were newspaper men and who were urging me to write the story of my stay in that strange outfit called the Red Army. So I started writing it; and I wrote about fifty pages, you know, just for the heck of it, and sent it to one friend of mine who thought it was very interesting and very worthwhile and that I should continue, so I did.

Then the book was published practically instantly, probably because it was of interest, general interest; there weren't too many ex-Red Army men who were running around free in the West. It's a very silly little book; that's all there is to it. It was very badly edited by McMillan, but it's a book.

Q HAVE YOU GOTTEN TOGETHER WITH ANY OF YOUR FORMER COMRADES?

A Yes, occasionally, yes. I mean mostly it was by correspondence--you mean from the Red Army?

Q YES.

A I probably am one of two or maybe three of that unit who is out in the West, or alive for that matter. There was one whom I had found about four years ago who was still in Poland. I was, at that time, in Italy; and

we were correspondents. We were planning to get together, and then he died. So that was it.

Q WHAT ABOUT YOUR COMRADES OF THE POLISH ARMY?

A I am in contact with a great many of them, yes, because there is a association of our regiment which is based in London; but they are all over the place, I mean, you name it, they are all over the world. So, I am in contact with quite a few of them, yes.

Q WOULD YOU CARE TO TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR LIFE IN THE RUSSIAN ARMY, THE WAY YOU WROTE IT IN YOUR BOOK. I FIND IT VERY INTERESTING THAT SOMEBODY'S HERE WHO CAN TELL US ABOUT IT.

A You would have to ask me a specific question because I really don't know what to start with.

Q I'M NOT A MILITARY EXPERT, ABSOLUTELY.

A Neither am I. But the question is very simply that there really isn't anything in particular as far as the so-called peace time, other than there wasn't any peace. I was in Odessa and went through the training, such as it was. Then when the war broke out, when the Germans attacked the Russians on the 22nd of June of '41, I found myself on the front three days later. Then it was a question of keeping alive because if you remember, the Russians were being destroyed practically as quickly as the Poles were destroyed by the Germans in '39.

So, I have given up, practically single-handedly,

one large city after another to the Germans. I was twice wounded in the meantime, and then I took part in the first counter-offensive in late '41.

Q WHAT UNIT WERE YOU ATTACHED TO?

A I was in artillery, but then after my unit was destroyed, I was in another and--(shakes head).

Q TOUGH LIFE?

A Yes, but luckily it ended well, and it was 50 years ago, yes, 50 years ago just about. So that's about it, you know, really. It's nothing much to say. Anybody who wants to find out about it should read that little book, which is knocking about somewhere here in the public libraries and so forth and so on. Of course, there are no books anymore to be bought because they were two very short editions, one was 7,500 copies and another one was, I think, 4,000.

Q YOU MEAN IT'S OUT OF PRINT NOW?

A Well, it was 40 years ago, and the book was not a howling success, you know. It was well received, but it was nothing really very--it wasn't a best-seller shall we say.

Q I'M SURE YOU HAD A LOT TO SAY IN IT THOUGH.

A Not really, not really. It was, as I said before, very badly edited by the McMillan Company to the point that they had cut out just about anything I had to say about my own impressions or my own thinking and

musings politically, you know, attitudes. It was just cut down to what a young man at the time did, so that's about it. It wasn't very good, I mean the end result.

Q-2 I HAVE A QUESTION. YOU SAY THEY EDITED YOUR BOOK AND CUT OUT YOUR OWN PERSONAL OPINIONS AND OBSERVATIONS.

A Yes.

Q-2 WAS THAT FOR POLITICAL REASONS?

A No. I believe it was just the editor who was at that time working on the book, who was a nice chap, had an idea that political musings and my own personal musings were of no importance. He just wanted action.

Q-2 AN ACTION WAR NOVEL?

A (Shrugs shoulders). Yes.

Q-2 YOU SAY YOU WEREN'T AN EXPERT ON JEWISH AFFAIRS, AND NEITHER AM I ACTUALLY. I DON'T KNOW IF ANYBODY HERE REALLY IS IN THIS CONNECTION; BUT I'M JUST CURIOUS IF YOU WERE AWARE IN YOUR UNITS IN THE POLISH ARMY AND LATER IN THE RED ARMY, WERE THERE JEWISH SOLDIERS THAT REMAINED IN IT?

A Yes, there were quite a few. Not terribly many because if you consider that the Jewish population of Poland was about 10 percent before the war, I couldn't say that there were 10 percent of the Jews in the army; but there probably was 5, 6, 7 percent.

Q-2 WAS THERE ANY DISCUSSION AMONGST THE JEWISH UNITS, THE JEWISH SOLDIERS WITHIN YOUR UNIT, OF PERHAPS HIDING THEIR JEWISH IDENTITY IN CASE THEY WERE CAPTURED BY THE RUSSIANS; AND HOW A POLISH SOLDIER THAT WOULD BE CAPTURED WOULD BE TREATED AS OPPOSED TO HOW A JEWISH-POLISH SOLDIER WOULD BE TREATED?

A You mean by the Russians or by the Germans?

Q-2 BY THE GERMANS.

A No. That war in '39 went so quickly there was no--no, I don't really think so. As a matter of fact, you probably know or maybe you don't know, quite a few of the Jewish soldiers who were taken prisoner by the Germans survived during the war in P.O.W. camps.

Q-2 DID THEY HIDE THEIR JEWISH IDENTITY OR WERE THEY TREATED AS PRISONERS OF WAR?

A No. The ones who were taken in '39, under arms, were absolutely treated as P.O.W.s. There was a general whose name is Mond, General Mond, M-o-n-d, who was a Jewish general in the Polish Army, who was not only taken prisoner and survived the war, but he was taken prisoner and the Germans let him keep his saber as kind of a honorary gesture. I am not trying to say the Germans were very nice chaps, you know; I am just answering your question on this particular angle.

Q-3 MR. VIRSKI, COULD YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE SENTIMENTS OF THE POLISH PEOPLE JUST PRIOR TO

THE WAR; WAS THERE A GREAT DEAL OF FEAR OR WAS THERE A GREAT DEAL OF CONFIDENCE THAT THEY COULD KEEP THE GERMANS--

A No. See, I was very young at that time and all I heard around was that we could keep the Germans at bay. There was a lot of bravura, you know, that in two weeks we would be in Berlin. I somehow, being rather pessimistic or realistic, I knew even then that we didn't stand a chance; but I didn't realize that it would go that far. The general tenor was, we can keep up and, of course, France and England would come to our rescue, which, of course, they didn't at all until the end of the--

Q WHAT MADE YOU PESSIMISTIC?

A Well, watching. I knew Germany before the war, a little bit. Although the last time I was in Germany, I think I was about 16 years old, Hitler was already in power; but traveling was perfectly normal. I saw this as one huge military machine. Poland was a small country with a very fine little army, not little but not really at all equipment-wise up to the Hitler army. Then, you know, it was clear, I mean they had a fantastic air force. We had something like 800 planes; they had something like 23,000 in the beginning of the war. And they were figures which were for everybody to see; they weren't even hiding it.

Q WHAT MADE YOU GO TO GERMANY AS A YOUNG MAN?

A I was traveling through Germany to France.

Q YOU ALSO SAID YOU HAD YOUR FATHER WITH YOU AT ONE POINT.

A Yes.

Q DID YOUR FATHER GO INTO THE ARMY AS WELL?

A No. My father was an older gentleman at that time. He was evacuated from Krakow by the Polish authorities when the Germans were coming close because he would have been exposed as one of the social leaders of Krakow. Then I found him after I came out of the-- when I broke away from the Russians, I found him in that city of Lwow and stayed with him. We stayed together until I was taken to the Red Army.

Q WHAT ABOUT YOUR MOTHER?

A My mother died in Krakow in '43.

Q AND WAS YOUR BROTHER IN THE ARMY TOO?

A He was in the Polish Air Force, yes.

Q SO WHEN DID YOU MEET YOUR BROTHER AGAIN?

A In New York in '46.

Q DID YOU HAVE CONTACT WITH HIM DURING ALL THOSE YEARS?

A No. We didn't know about each other for the first three years. Then we somehow, through a very complicated thing, we found out where we were. We were in the--because he was at that time already in England.

So we stayed in contact by mail until we got to see each other in '46 in New York.

Q DID YOUR FATHER MAKE IT TO THE UNITED STATES?

A No. My father was shot either by the Russians or by the Germans in '41 when the Germans came across the border.

Q-2 THE GERMANS WERE KILLING POLES THAT HAD EDUCATION.

A Well, they were killing particularly any educated class of people. I mean anybody who was, that had a level of more than lower-middle class, let's say.

Q-2 AND YOUR MOTHER HAD A P.H.D.

A Well mother, no, mother died. Mother died from a heart attack.

Q-2 YOU MENTIONED YOU WERE IN LWOW WHICH I BELIEVE IS LEMBERG.

A Well, it's now called Lvov.

Q-2 IT'S A VERY JEWISH CITY. I'M WONDERING, WHEN YOU WERE THERE, WAS IT STILL--HAD THEY BEEN LIQUIDATED?

A Under the Russians there was a lot of Jews, yes.

Q-2 THAT'S WHEN YOU WERE THERE?

A Yes.

Q-2 SO THEY WERE STILL THERE, THE JEWS?

A Yes. Lemberg is a German name for it. It never was Germany, it was part of the Austro-Hungarian

Empire. That's when Lemberg was Lwow, Lwow was Lemberg, and Krakow was Cracow. You know, but pure baloney anyhow.

Q BUT IT WAS, HOW DO YOU PRONOUNCE IT, LVOV.

A Well, in Polish it's Lwow and in Russian it's Lvov.

Q I SEE. WAS IT LWOW BEFORE IT BECAME LEMBERG?

A Well, it was Lwow for about roughly 800 years and became Lemberg after 1796 when the Austro-Hungarian, when Poland didn't exist anymore because it was divided between Prussia, Russia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. You should know that; you are from Berlin.

Q THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS BERLINERS DON'T KNOW.

A Well, Berliners are supposed to know everything.

Q THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONFIDENCE.

A Yes. The only thing Berliners didn't know was that Hitler was not going to be very nice to the Jews; right?

Q SO IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO TELL US ABOUT?

A No, no. I mean, if you have any particular question, please shoot.

Q-3 WE SORT OF GLOSSED OVER THE WAR PERIOD. COULD YOU GO BACK AND TELL ME WHERE YOU WERE ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1939. WHAT UNIT YOU WERE WITH AND WHAT HAPPENED?

A Well, on September 1st in the morning, at 4:00 in the morning, the Germans came over, and the planes came over and bombed and strafed Krakow. I was still at home; all of us were at home. On the 2nd I went in the unit, which was the regiment of Krakow, while my brother had gone to another unit. By the 3rd, both my parents were evacuated, going east; and the Germans I believe, if I am not wrong, entered the city either on the 4th or the 5th. Krakow is pretty close to the German border.

Q-3 DID YOU ENGAGE IN COMBAT WITH THEM?

A In '39 I didn't see very much action because, you see, I was in a unit which was composed up to about 50 percent volunteers, as I was. So we just had the carbine and about 50 rounds of ammunition. There was some skirmishes, you know, but then the unit was destroyed; so I joined another unit. It was a debacle, there was no question about it.

Q-2 WERE YOU EXPECTING HELP FROM FRANCE?

A Oh, yes.

Q-2 AND WHAT WAS THE FEELING, BETRAYAL?

A Very much so. Not only from France, but from England too.

Q-2 ENGLAND DID DECLARE WAR.

A Yes.

Q-2 BUT THAT WAS ABOUT ALL THEY DID.

A That was all they did.

Q HOW DID THE RUSSIANS TREAT YOU WHEN YOU WENT FIRST INTO THE ARMY?

A Well, they weren't very pleasant about it, because I was in a group of about 80 young men of my age from Lwow and they forbade us to speak Polish to each other. Don't tell Mr. Gorbachev now, but we did speak Polish anyhow.

Q-2 THIS WAS WHAT YEAR; THIS WAS '39?

A No, this was '41.

Q-2 THIS IS AFTER, OBVIOUSLY WAY AFTER, THE MOLOTOV-RIBBENTROP PACT?

A Right.

Q-2 HOW DID THE POLISH SOLDIERS FEEL TOWARDS THEIR RUSSIAN COMRADES UNDER ARMS, KNOWING THAT THEIR COUNTRY HAD BEEN DIVIDED BETWEEN HITLER AND--

A Wait. Phrase that again; it was what?

Q-2 IN OTHER WORDS, WHEN YOU WERE A POLISH SOLDIER SERVING IN A POLISH UNIT UNDER THE RED ARMY TOGETHER WITH RUSSIAN SOLDIERS, RUSSIAN UNITS, WAS THERE A LOT OF TENSION BETWEEN THE POLISH AND THE RUSSIANS?

A Well, I just mentioned that. It was kind of like, you know, we weren't really the soldiers; we were just being the draftees.

Q WHAT I MEAN HERE, YOUR COUNTRY HAD BEEN DIVIDED BETWEEN THE RUSSIANS AND THE--

A Well, that was in '39 already, and I'm talking about two years later when the Russians over-night became the allies, you know. Russia became the great allies of the West.

Q-2 YOU MUST HAVE BEEN PRETTY CYNICAL ABOUT BEING-

A Well, yes. I have been cynical most of my life, yes. (Laughter)

Q-2 AND YOU'RE NOT GOING TO CHANGE NOW; RIGHT?

A No I'm not going to change now. No reason to.

Q-3 WHERE DID YOUR UNIT, YOUR RUSSIAN UNIT FIGHT.

A We fought on the Rumanian front in Bessarabia. Then we were retreating through the Ukraine.

Q-3 AND HOW LONG WERE YOU IN COMBAT IN RUMANIA?

A All in all, for about 7 1/2 months, 8 months.

Q-3 AND HOW DID YOU FIND THE RUSSIAN ARMY, WAS IT WELL-EQUIPPED?

A The Russian Army was not a match for the Germans either. Absolutely nothing, they didn't have anything to put up against the Germans, and they were also en route. They also, for instance, throughout the Ukraine, people were deserting en masse because the Ukrainians, at the time, were expecting the Germans to come and liberate them from Stalin, which wasn't the case. But they were running away like crazy.

Q-3 YOU SAID YOU ESCAPED FROM THE ARMY. WHY DID

YOU DECIDE TO GO AND HOW DID YOU ACCOMPLISH LEAVING THE RED ARMY?

A Well, after this whole thing with Russia becoming a great ally, I knew that there was a Polish Free Army organized in a place, what was at that time, Southern Siberia. I asked for the transfer, which they should have given to me, but they refused three times. After they refused the third time, I just decided I have to take my fate into my own hands; and I somehow succeeded in defecting the Red Army.

Q DID YOU DEFECT ALONE?

A By myself, yes.

Q DID OTHERS DEFECT TOO?

A Oh, there were a great many who were running away, yes.

Q-4 COULD YOU TELL US THE STORY OF YOUR DEFECTION, STEP-BY-STEP WHAT YOU WENT THROUGH?

A I was wounded and I had both of my legs shot through. I had been in, what do you call--

Q TRACTION?

A No.

Q-3 CAST?

A Cast. Both of my legs were put into casts, and that wasn't the cast of today, that was the cast of Russia in 1941 and weighed about a ton. I could move about only on crutches, and not very well either; but

somehow or other--You asked me, did I escape by myself; one of my former colleagues from that original unit was in the place where I was, which was called (Rostov), you won't even find it on the map. He helped me insofar that he would get me--I had to get out of the hospital, secure some kind of documents; and he helped to put me on the train. Which I did; I got a set of documents which belonged to a Soviet sergeant who died on the bed next to me. Then I escaped with his documents, which I kind of embellished a little bit, putting in my name. Then I got out of the hospital, and this friend of mine hid me for two days and then put me on a train which was generally going up north across the Ural Mountains, where I was supposed to go.

I was on the run for 32 days, and then finally I got to the place where the Polish units were supposed to be, except that they moved by that time already. They moved down to West Pakistan outside of Tashkent. So I got back on the same train, luckily, and traveled for another eight days and got to that place. That was it.

Q WHAT TIME OF YEAR WAS THAT?

A Actually, I started in late February. Strange enough, it wasn't a very bad winter. That was that first winter which wasn't so terribly bad. And once you crossed the Ural Mountains it was hardly bad, then once you were going down to Southern Siberia, which was

Uzbekistan, it was already balmy weather, like San Francisco.

Q WHAT DID YOU DO FOR FOOD? HOW DID YOU FEED YOURSELF?

A Oh, we just scrounged for it, you know; you just did what you could. Some places, they would give you some food. I was a wounded Russian soldier; I was in a Russian uniform. I promoted myself up to a sergeant, although I was not. I was on crutches, so I merited certain sympathy from the populace. That's what helped.

Q AT THAT TIME YOU SPOKE FLUENT RUSSIAN?

A Oh, yes. But some people knew that I was a Pole and knew that I was a deserter, and they didn't give me away, strange enough, at least two people.

Q HOW DID THEY KNOW?

A There was one Russian officer who was traveling with me for awhile; and at one of the stations where we got off the train, where we were changing trains, they had posted "wanted posters" for the deserters, hundreds of them. One was mine. It was a very bad picture, but good enough. From my Red Army paper, that picture. So he knew.

Then another person also kind of figured it out.

Q-3 WHY DIDN'T THEY TURN YOU IN?

A Well, in that case, that Russian officer was a decent guy. He was also obviously against the regime.

The other case, the case of the other, was probably also a similar attitude: To hell with it; if the guy is running away, let him do it.

But, you know, while you were running, you were risking being shot against the wall ten times a day, because those credentials I had were completely wrong. I mean, they were forged and it was very easy to figure it out. The only thing that helped, most of those patrols were illiterate Asian sergeants. So they sometimes were holding the papers the other way around.

Q UPSIDE DOWN?

A Yes, upside down.

Q-3 WHAT DID YOU DO WHEN YOU GOT TO THE POLISH, MET UP WITH THE POLISH UNIT? WHAT KIND OF ACTION DID THAT UNIT SEE?

A You mean see in Russia?

Q-3 YES.

A With Russia we were still licking our wounds because all of us came, you know, from the Red Army; not too many from the Red Army, from concentrations camps, from prison camps, and from the so-called exile, forced exile. Everyone was practically on his and her last legs.

We were also decimated by that time by typhoid. Even

though, I was still first in the hospital because those wounds were festering. People were dying every morning on the ward, like flies. Then, after we were evacuated into Iran and Iraq, we left our dead behind. More of them died in Iran, and then we became a normal army unit.

Ladies and gentlemen, I will have to run very soon, so--

Q THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

A Thank you. I'm sorry if I am a disappointment.

Q DON'T BE SORRY.

Q-2 CAN WE ASK YOU A LAST COUPLE OF QUICK QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU TAKE OFF?

A Yes.

Q-2 HOW LONG DID THE GERMANS OCCUPY IRAQ; IT WAS SOMETHING LIKE A WEEK, WASN'T IT, A VERY SHORT PERIOD OF TIME?

A Iran you mean, not Iraq, Iran. In Iraq they have never been.

Q-2 THEY WEREN'T IN IRAQ FOR A WEEK?

A No, no. They were for about two weeks in Iran. They were only in that area which was close to the oil fields, and then they were asked--

Q-2 THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT WAS PRO-GERMAN, PRO-NAZI?

Q-3 WHAT KIND OF FIGHTING DID YOU DO IN IRAN AND IRAQ?

A No, there was no fighting.

Q-3 THERE WAS NO FIGHTING; YOU WERE LIKE--

Q-2 THEY WERE FIGHTING IN NORTHERN AFRICA AGAINST
ROMMEL.

Q-3 OH.

Q TOBRUK?

A I came in the last. I came practically for the liberation of Tobruk, for the lifting of the siege. Then I was in El Alamein which is west (sic) of Tobruk. Then we were pulled back to Cairo and then, shortly afterwards we went on the invasion of Sicily. Then there was the Italian Campaign, Monte Cassino, and all this kind of thing.

Q WHERE DID YOU MEET WITH THE AMERICANS FOR THE FIRST TIME?

A Well, I suppose in Egypt, yes. Then, of course, in Italy. The Americans were usually on the left of us.

What was your other question?

Q-4 CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE DAY THAT THE RUSSIANS CAME INTO POLAND AND YOUR ALLEGIANCE WAS THEN DEMANDED TO BE CHANGED FROM THE GERMANS TO THE RUSSIANS. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE SPECIFIC PERIOD, ABOUT A COUPLE OF DAYS IN THERE, AND WHAT YOU WERE DOING SPECIFICALLY.

A Well, I have no allegiance to either the Germans or the Russians.

Q-4 WELL, I MEAN, THE POLITICAL DEMANDS IS WHAT I AM TALKING ABOUT.

A Yes. When the Russians came on the 17th of September, I was actually already on the ground because the last unit, with which I was, was destroyed. So, I was moving free of my friends, colleagues really is the word, toward the Rumanian border, which was the ultimate goal because there was the hope you would cross into Rumania, as a great many people did, my brother for instance--

Q-2 YOU WERE BY YOURSELF, YOU WEREN'T--

A No. I was with three other guys. I never knew them very well, but--And then the dawn on the 17th, I was in a small village. Actually, a bit of Judaica, we were staying in the house of a Jewish cobbler there. The Russians came in, just rolled into the town in tanks. There was no Polish Army there, there was only a unit of The Frontier Guards which was either decimated or ran away; and that was it. Then they moved over and took whatever of the Polish troops which were moving toward the East, away from the onrushing German troops. They took them all in prison.

Q-4 WERE YOU WEARING A POLISH ARMY Uniform AT THE TIME?

A At that time I already changed. I only had the uniform pants.

Q-4 BUT THEY KNEW YOU WERE A SOLDIER?

A Well, they assumed that.

Q-4 WERE THEY JUST LOOKING FOR BODIES TO PUT IN THEIR ARMY?

A Yes, sure, yes.

Q-2 WHAT POLITICAL PERSUASION WERE YOUR PARENTS BEFORE THE WAR? YOU SAY YOUR MOTHER HAD A P.H.D.; WHAT WAS IT A P.H.D. IN; WAS SHE IN ACADEMIA--

A Philosophy.

Q-2 SO, WERE THEY SOCIALISTS, WERE THEY--

A No. I suppose you could call my parents probably middle-ground. Because I was, for instance, pretty close to the socialist organization. I never joined the (Domestic) Party, but I was pretty close to the socialist group; where my parents were, naturally, apolitical. They were not really interested in politics.

Q-2 DID THEY REALIZE WHAT THE POLISH MIDDLE CLASS, EDUCATED CLASS, WERE GOING TO BE UP AGAINST IF HITLER CAME IN?

A Yes, most everybody realized, yes. Listen, Poland in '39 was a clear case. I mean, everybody who had a bit of gray matter between his ears and who wasn't really being "rah-rah" patriotic, knew that we wouldn't have a chance if they started, if they moved over; except everybody was hoping that France and England would come to our rescue. And France and England didn't even deem

it necessary to bomb, let's say, to throw a few bombs on Germany. They didn't do a thing.

Q-4 HOW DID YOUR SOCIALIST INTERESTS EVOLVE AS A YOUNGER PERSON; AND WERE THOSE THEN AFFECTED BY YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH THE RUSSIANS AND ALL?

A No. Well, you have to distinguish between Socialists and the Russians, you know. But my socialism was developing very simply because in Poland, when you were a young man and, again, if you were thinking about anything, you were between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. There was nowhere to go.

I mean politically you had to take a stand and the Polish Social Democrats and Socialist Party--there were two socialist parties--were the only camp which made any sense. Otherwise, you would have to go to the right and be with the National Democratic Party, which was kind of leaning toward totalitarian ideas. All Communists, which I wouldn't even dream of, they were proscribed in Poland in the last, what, for about 15 years of Polish existence.

But it had nothing to do with my later sojourn in Soviet Russia because I saw it even--as I always thought that was a horrible experience of human kind; I never knew it was that bad, you know, until I saw it. We were very well informed. Being young then in Poland, we knew what the Russians were, I mean what the Soviet Communist

was. We knew it rather well because we were next door to them, because we had a great many people who were traveling back and forth. The information on the Soviet Russia in Poland, particularly in the governmental sector, was so good that even today the information about Soviet Russia gathered by the Polish sources of information are still pretty valid. We were the only ones that really somehow knew what was going on there.

Q-4 AND WHAT WAS IT SPECIFICALLY THAT YOU SAW THAT ENHANCED YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE IN RUSSIA? YOU ALLUDED TO, YOU HAD HEARD STORIES THEN YOU FINALLY SAW.

A Well, it was absolutely hell on wheels. It was a totalitarian regime, police state, horrifying economy, I mean, you name it, it was all there.

Q-4 COULD YOU GIVE US A COUPLE OF SPECIFIC EXAMPLES--

A No, no, I mean--

Q-4 --OF ENCOUNTERS YOU HAD THAT EMPHASIZED THIS?

A No. I mean, people spying on their own parents and vice-versa, the parents on their children, and this kind of thing, reporting them to the--

Q-4 DO YOU KNOW SPECIFIC INSTANCES OF THAT HAPPENING?

A Yes, if I think hard on it I could.

Q-4 COULD YOU TELL US A LITTLE STORY ABOUT SPECIFIC--

A No, not really. At one point when I was on the run, we came of the house of a woman who just came out from the concentration camp, and who spent something like six years in the concentration camp because somebody denounced her for absolutely no good reason. She spent, I suppose, between '34 until '41 in the concentration camp. She knew who it was who denounced her: She was a teacher in the elementary school; she was denounced for some anti-governmental thinking by a woman who wanted her job.

Q-4 THIS WAS ONE OF STALIN'S CONCENTRATION CAMPS YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT?

A Yes, that's Russia.

Q WHERE WAS IT LOCATED?

A Where was what located?

Q THE CAMP.

A I have no idea. Listen, there were thousands of them.

Q WAS IT NORTHWESTERN SIBERIA OR DID THEY HAVE THEM ALL OVER THE PLACE?

A All over the place. Some of them were in the Ukraine, some of them were in what is today's Russian Republic, they were all over the place. The big ones were, of course, to the east, and north; but they were

all over the place. I mean, if you look at the Archipelago Gulag, the Archipelago where you have the map of them, which is not complete but it shows quite a lot.

Q-4 HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT LECH WALESIA AND SOLIDARITY AND ALL THE CHANGES THAT HAVE ENSUED IN EASTERN EUROPE IN THE LAST TEN YEARS OR SO?

A Well, I am very much enthused; I am very happy about it. Solidarity actually, in my opinion--probably because I happen to be a Pole--is actually the beginning of all the movement to free Europe; that's what started it. I dare even say that Gorbachev hadn't had even any idea when Lech Walesa had organized Solidarity in '77, '78, and '79; he was still licking the boots of his bosses at that time. So I feel very good about it.

Q-4 DO YOU HAVE ANY THOUGHTS ABOUT WHAT IS GOING ON IN EASTERN EUROPE THAT YOU THINK--DO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE ANY SPECIAL INSIGHTS ABOUT THE SITUATION THAT AN AMERICAN-BORN PERSON, NOT FAMILIAR FIRST-HAND WITH THAT PART OF THE WORLD, WOULD NOT UNDERSTAND? AMERICANS HAVE SOME ROSY ASPIRATIONS ABOUT EASTERN EUROPE RIGHT NOW; DO YOU HAVE ANY THOUGHTS ABOUT THAT THAT ARE A LITTLE MORE SOPHISTICATED THAN OUR ROSY ASPIRATIONS?

A Well, the rosy aspirations is that the countries, most of them, have liberated themselves from the Soviet regimes, Sovietized regimes; but it is going to be a very hard way, to get the house in order and

economically to get up and, you know, start living normally. It's going to be very difficult. Especially as now everybody's trying to push all the money and aid to Soviet Russia but not to the countries which have been imprisoned by Soviet Russia for 45 years.

Although, the East Germans are very lucky because they have their older brothers, you know, who are taking care of them; but the rest--

Q RUMANIANS, BULGARIANS?

A Rumanians, Bulgarians are very hard case. I mean, they are still communist regimes because they didn't know any better. The Bulgarians are practically Russian; and the Rumanians are also a strange case, but they will probably eventually get themselves straightened out.

Q ALBANIA?

Q-3 MR. VIRSKI, HAVE YOU RETURNED TO POLAND?

A No, I have not.

Q-3 WHY IS THAT; HAVE YOU EVER WANTED TO?

A I, in '45--that will be the last [question]-in '45 we were offered by the British, who were our sponsors so to speak, an opportunity to return to Poland as victorious Polish soldiers in the West. Well, I turned it down immediately. That was also the Polish government that were issuing the invitation. I have turned it down immediately because I have gone through

Russia and knew what it was all about.

Very few people did go back; there was probably about, not quite 1.5 percent of my army men who did go back, most of them because they had some immediate family: wife, child whom they hadn't even seen, you know, this kind of thing. A great many of them re-defected; quite a lot of them spent the next several years in prison; a lot of them got killed.

I had decided in '45 that I was not going to go back to Poland as long as the Communists are there, and I made a vow. I didn't realize, I thought it would be for the next 500 years; I didn't think it would change only 45 years later. But then I just really didn't really feel like going for a long time. By the time I felt that maybe I would go, I already came to the point that I practically didn't have anybody in Poland. I had a couple of old aunts, one cousin. I knew that I have changed, Poland has changed, the Poles have changed; and most people who did go on a visit came out tremendously disillusioned because the dreams were gone. So I was spared at least this one.

Now, as I said before, maybe when things in Poland get settled--because they're not settled in Poland at all, just last Saturday they fired three communist ministers. Maybe I will decide to go on a trip, but I'm not quite sure yet.

VIRSKI-37

I thank you all very much.

Q-3 THANK YOU. WE APPRECIATE YOUR TAKING THE TIME.