

--recording [INAUDIBLE].

OK, anytime.

Today is October 25, 1993. We were at the Holocaust Oral History Project with Henia Fishman. The interviewer it's Ruth Sterling. The video cameraman is John Grant. Thanks for coming, Henia. Can you begin by telling us about where you were born, when, and a little bit about your childhood?

I was born outside of Warsaw, a little village called Pustelnik. In 1937. I don't have official date of my birth, but I think it is October 1. And most of the family was there, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. I only was told about the names just recently by my uncle's wife.

But when the war started, I was only three years old, two years old, actually and a lot of the memories are, I think, what people told me. And some of them are the actual ones, but they are very sketchy. I am not quite sure exactly sometimes what was real, what wasn't. But certain things are very, very clear.

And before we went to take-- we were taken to the ghetto, the only thing I can really remember is living in a big complex with a courtyard. And one time my mother gave me, I think, my father's playing cards that I lost, and I got a spanking for that.

Then, living in the ghetto, I know there were just a lot of people in a small quarters, and I was still with my mother and father. And I for sure know the grandmother and one of the aunts and her children were there. One of them was just a little older. Her name was Regina. She had two younger brothers.

And I don't remember the other cousins at all, and the only reason I remember those two and, actually, the baby because later on we were in a burned-out or abandoned factory where they were making bricks. And they were the last ones that I was with besides all the other people.

We left the ghetto, and this was for some kind of a work project. I don't remember where we were taken other than the fact that during the day the able bodies, my parents and other adults, were taken on trucks and brought back at night. During the day, only the kids and the old people were left in those-- and those, I think, were just tents. I don't think there were any permanent structures there. This was someplace outside of the Warsaw area.

And later I was told that they were making from the mud like a fuel for burning instead of coal. My father was one of the first ones that didn't come back. But getting back a little bit from when we were leaving the ghetto, the whole group of people was led out and put on the trucks. But one of the-- whether it was a kapo or somebody that was escorting the group of people was arguing with my father, or my father started the argument.

And my father kept saying that, no, we are not going to get killed, and the kapo kept saying that he is-- that we are for sure going to go to our death. But that was only the last thing I remember, and I really don't for how long my father was coming back-- was brought back from the work. But like I said, he was one of the first ones that didn't come back, so he was taken later on, I was told, to Treblinka.

And the same thing with-- one of my aunts was gone for a while, and then she came back. She was the mother of this girl, Regina, and the other two little kids. I don't remember their names. I don't know at what point at this time we were taken out from there. But I know being with my mother.

And apparently that was-- we were taken to the trains. I don't know at what point I was whether it-- before the train started going or thrown out from there. I was very tiny. I don't know if she could have squeezed me through something. But the next thing I remember is being in that burned out-- the abandoned factory, and this is where was my grandmother and the three little cousins of mine.

When we were taken out of ghetto-- this must have been summer-- by then it was quite cold at nights, so it must have

been already late fall. And one night-- I guess it was dawn-- some young woman that was over there-- and I don't know if she was Jewish or she was with the underground. She grabbed me and the other two kids, told us be quiet, throw us out of the window. And she came out with us, and we were hidden in the bushes. Apparently somebody alerted her that the Germans were coming.

They took everybody out. My grandmother was holding the little one. He was-- I can't talk. They lined them all up. I don't remember how many people were there. But one of the soldiers-- I don't know if it was Gestapo-- he came, and he patted the little one on the face. He took out a gun and shot my grandmother and him. I don't remember anything else.

We were, like I said, just outside there. I don't know-- I think they-- I don't know if they killed everybody. I really only remember this. And then we stayed all night-- all day, I guess, in those bushes, and at night that young woman took us to a family.

And they fed us-- and I don't know what was the conversation, but they kept me-- later I was told that this was-- she was going to have-- she was going to come and get me. But she never did.

And then the Polish family-- his name is Kazimierz, was Kazimierz [? Stepniowski. ?] He found out that she was killed, and Regina and her little brother was killed, too. And they kept me on and off. They were apparently helping Jews, not by keeping them permanently over there because this was a small village. It was outside of Pustelnik another a couple of miles. It was Jelenitz [PLACE NAME]

And I guess the neighbors weren't very cooperative with the Jews. I mean, they wouldn't help-- they were the only ones. So everything was always locked up, the shutters, because they were afraid that somebody is going to come over there. And I think this must have been in November-- this is what I was told, that when I got there it was November 1942.

I was a mess. I was full of blisters, lice all over. They had to shave my head. I didn't have any control of bladder at that time. But I guess even with all the dangers they decided to keep me in this-- I lived with them until I left Poland.

People were coming and going over there at night, even if they just came to get a meal or leave some information. And apparently one of them was my youngest uncle. His name was Berek, and he was only in his 20s, last name Frank, either early 20s or 20. And he apparently was killed right before the war, just a few days before liberation. I don't know how my uncle found out about it, but maybe through the magistrate over there or whatever because my uncle's the one that survived. He was in Russia during the war. His name was Sam Frank.

And of course the whole time I was there it was in hiding, and they had a little cellar. Every so often, when everything was bolted up, they would let me out. But if somebody was coming, they put me back in the cellar. And one time somebody came unexpectedly, so they put me behind the chifferobe. There was a closet for clothes.

And I was there for so long, in the back of it, that I had an accident. I had to go to the bathroom. So my-- I call him an uncle. My uncle was saying to me, he says, all of a sudden I see that thing coming from under. He was afraid that people would notice, and he got them out.

But one time the Gestapo did come. Again, it was very early in the morning. And he didn't have time to put me under-- because this was a whole elaborate. Thing there was a kitchen table and pots and pans on the floor. It was like a little coffin, really. And when somebody was coming they put me over there. There was a little pillow over there, put the table back, and shove the pots and pans back on the floor.

But it was too late. They were banging. They apparently were-- my father-- I call him father, but he was-- he was the one that told me that-- he spoke German because he lived in Germany before the war. They said that they were going to blow up the house or something like this if they don't open immediately.

So they threw-- this is-- I was asleep because I slept on two chairs. They were two chairs put together, and this is what I was sleeping on at night. This was only one room.

So he threw me on that bed that they slept on, threw the cover of it, and when they opened the door. He says, there was only one curl sticking out, and he was absolutely mortified that they are just going to kill me. Over the bed there was a picture hanging, one of those big ones that was hanging away from the top. I don't know, but you could put something behind it. I don't know how to demonstrate it, but it was against the wall, like this, so there could be something behind.

The German stood on the chair on the bed to look behind that picture. And whether he didn't want to see me or he did and he said, forget it, or whatever, they arrested him, my uncle, father, and they left. The whole time he says he thought that they-- he was-- when he was arrested, there were about 10 other people from the village arrested for various reasons.

He and another man were the only one that were-- I think his wife took whatever little they had, jewelry, or rings, or whatever, and she was able to get him out the other eight people were executed. So this was another close call.

And towards the end of the war, I guess, I was getting a little bigger. In summer, she planted-- my aunt planted a lot of flowers, very tall ones, so I could go in the garden and play a little bit. But one time I did forget. I walked across the road over there because there was sand. And I suppose I was lost in my little world over there, and all of a sudden, I feel somebody standing over me. And this is when I was sure that I would die because I looked up, and it was a German soldier.

Apparently my uncle was standing in the gate when this happened. He saw. And of course he couldn't do anything at this point. I darted and wanted to run away, and the soldier grabbed me. And when he patted me on my cheek I knew that that was it because this is what they did to my little cousin. When he started reaching for the pocket, I thought he was reaching for the gun.

But he took, I guess, some candy, Lifesavers, or whatever, gave it to me, and I darted home. This is the only other time I got spanked by another father because he was so hysterical and nervous.

Getting back talking about memories, listen, I don't remember that much, but when we were in those camps with my grandmother, I remember sleeping always on the edge, and I always felt cold because, I guess, at night it was getting cold. And I wanted to get in the middle between the people. That was another memory of living outside. I don't remember that much more, I don't think, from the war years.

Do you remember your mother?

Yeah, I remember her having dark hair pulled back, and this is what my uncle confirmed. And my father was a sturdy guy with the blonde, curly hair, and this is the only thing I remember about him, and that exit when my father was so sure of himself that he is not going to get killed. I was-- those people that came to the house told my Polish father-- Polish father, uncle. I was calling him Uncle for the "benefit," quote, unquote, of the neighbors after the war, really, but everybody knew that I was Jewish.

And in fact, right after the war some of the neighbors weren't very nice when I was actually out, and I got beaten up on a regular basis. Two little sisters busted my nose. They took one of those shovels because, why Hitler didn't kill them all? That was the attitude.

When your mother and you were on the train, do you remember more details about that?

It just seems that-- I don't know if it first was on those vans that they were taking them to work to this one destination. There was just so many people. I don't know how we were separated. Apparently the people on the ground said that they have found me on the way of the train, and that train, supposedly, was going to Treblinka, that I was in one of-- someplace in the forest. This is so unclear. I have no recollection of it.

Do you think your mother might have--

I was told that she died in Treblinka, too. Now, that's absolutely hearsay, but somebody was saying that my father was, I

guess, feisty and fighting, that when he was in Treblinka-- again, this is absolute [INAUDIBLE]-- he was thrown in the pit filled with lye, that white stuff that burns.

[INAUDIBLE]

[INAUDIBLE]. Yeah. And then this is how he died.

[Interviewer mumbling in background]

And when I was-- I don't know-- I think about 16 I went to the camp over there because they were saying that sometimes people wrote on the pieces of paper. And I just didn't last very long. I just couldn't deal with it, and I didn't want to deal with it. And I just left, a little hysterical.

Did you have any brothers or sisters?

No, I was the only child.

In fact, when I did ask my uncle how many kids were there in the family, I don't know if he even knew. Because he was older at the time. He should have known. But he just died recently, so some of the information the children started bringing up and asking-- it was by calling her that I found out.

Did you know anything about your family?

The Polish family?

Yeah, your Polish--

No, no, they didn't know them at all, so it was really just by accident that I ended up over there. It was going to be just temporarily. The young woman that-- I don't know if she was with the underground or-- I was told that she was maybe 16 or 18 herself.

So how she knew or how she heard by getting us out before everybody was pulled out and killed over there in the abandoned brick factory-- I don't know if they had anybody notifying people. But this was really out of the way. It was just not near any houses or anything.

About how long were you in that?

I have no recollection how long. I really don't. I know this is how I-- this was the last place that I was brought, by whoever.

Do you know when you were placed in the ghetto? Has anyone told you since that time, when you are placed in the ghetto?

I don't know. I really don't have any dates on that either. It seems that-- like I said, I was little. I survived not because of my wits. It's just because circumstances and luck. But I have no idea how long we were there. I know it was just such a small place. It was awful lot of people.

And so I said, sure, and I said, I don't think I can really contribute that much other than what those-- after the war I remember more things, but obviously that's not as relevant as what actually happened during.

we can talk about about that too in a while. But first you -- after the war, did you try going-- did you go back to your home village to see if anyone--

Oh, I wasn't far away from it. This was all in the same area. In fact, I have met a cousin-- he, just before-- this is already

in 1956. Because the different Jewish organizations were coming around after the war, trying to locate any Jewish children, and, in fact, they contacted my family. They wanted to pay them for releasing me back because there were the Jewish orphanages in Warsaw.

And there was a woman over there that had also-- I never met her, but she also saved a little girl. And she gave her up, and every time she saw me she kept saying, why did I give her up, and blah, blah, blah, all these things. But the [? Stepniowskis ?] they really wanted to keep me. They never adopted me formally, so I always had my name.

I did go to the elementary school under their name, and it was-- the Polish name Halyna [? Stepniowska. ?] But we had the papers made because there was no documents whatsoever. That's why I say I was told-- they were told by one uncle that the youngest one that did come-- I guess he did once or twice, and he gave the information about my possible birth date.

I was about five years old when they got me, that I was born in October. But he didn't know when, so I celebrated October 1. And I guess this was the only knowledge that I had from anybody that was family. It just seems so little to remember.

Do you remember life during the war in hiding, day by day life with your with the [? Stepniowskis? ?]

Well, yeah, it was-- obviously I couldn't go out any place, but he used to make rubber balls, and two or three of them go on a bazaar and sell them, bring me a book to read, even though there was not money for bread. And the big thing was bringing Kaiser roll.

And he was teaching me how to read and write, so this was the only companion that I had, the little books that he brought me. And of course, they also-- in that one room everything was there together. They had goats, and I saw a little baby goat being born right there.

And he was not a religious person, but he was very much into tradition. So I guess when Christmas came in, he did all kinds of banging on the chimney, that Santa was coming, and I always got a little doll or something like that. So I was very fortunate.

And other than this one incident, when people came in-- this is what I remember. I don't know if there were more people that I was stuck behind the chifferobe and getting into the hallway-- that was always very frightening. Kids are very resilient. And I was told to keep quiet, and I did keep quiet.

During the end of the-- towards the end of the war, when, I guess, people were already loosening up a little bit, I was out a little bit more in the house, not so much outside after that one incident with the German soldier. But otherwise, once I started healing, the hair started growing back-- and the end of the war was-- we were looking forward to it, obviously.

Towards the very end, my father built a bunker outside, and he hid a lot of the scraps from the rubber. He was making the toys, the rubber balls, out of the inner tubes of the tires. I don't know why he was saving it all, but he was saving it. And when he built that bunker, just when the Russians were on one side-- because we were about 7 miles outside of Warsaw.

So when he built it with wood, he piled all the scraps of the rubber on top of it and then camouflaged it with branches of trees, and wood, et cetera. When one of the-- our house was just about destroyed when the shelling continued from the other side of Warsaw.

And one of the hit was on the bunker. I don't know if it was the rubber that bounced it right back off because we were there, the three of us and the dog. Because this is what saved us.

And there was a lot of-- the Germans, on the way out, retreating, they were killing anybody in sight that they could find, and apparently some of the villagers were making fun of my father, the way he was building that bunker. And they ended up dead, and we survived.

Do you remember-- can you tell a little bit more about your Polish mother? What was her name?

Alexandra, Alexandra. She was very busy just with the chickens, and the goats, and the cooking. And she was a good-hearted woman. She was just a very unhappy woman, very frustrated. So it was-- this was one thing about the home life, not so much during the war. I didn't realize this back then until I was getting older.

It was fighting and screaming all the time. And I said, I'm not going to have a house like this if I grow up. It was very sad, to the point that people in the village were making fun of it because the screaming carried on on the outside.

But one thing-- just going back, there was hardly any food any place, so she used to-- I don't know where she used to go. Again, it was only barter. And I think this was still during the war, yeah, because I was-- he was going-- my father was going to pick her up from the station. I'll help her up if she-- and this was very late at night.

And he did take me instead of leaving me at home. And I don't know what happened, but there was some kind of a ruckus over there. We had to jump again in bushes and sit for quite a while before we went to pick her up. And she wasn't able to get any food at that time. But nobody died. There was always something to eat.

Did you have any form of identification that you still carried with you from the ghetto?

No, nothing, absolutely nothing. So this is why I say they only knew about my name. And actually, my name was Chaya Rubin. And he called me Halyna, gave me a Polish name. But after the war, when the papers-- they had to give me some kind of papers. We had to go to court.

I guess he had a couple of fake witnesses based on the information that he had, and they wanted-- instead of putting Chaya on the papers, which was obviously very Jewish-- and with the Poles over there, they were just, I think, as antisemitic for the most part as they were before the war or during the war.

The judge wouldn't allow my name to be Henrika on the papers, which was, I guess, the equivalent of Chaya in English. And he says that this is a Christian name. This is a judge after the war. And he wouldn't give me Halyna. He wouldn't give me Henrika. So my father comes. He says, can we give it to her Henia, which is really like a pet name. It's not a formal legal name. So I ended up Henia in papers.

And in high school, every teacher-- why is it Henia? Why is it not Henrika?

What did you tell them?

I said I don't know, but I wasn't going to go into explanation about that and get flak from them, too. I couldn't wait to get out of Poland. And even though some of the people in the magistrate were giving me flak about the fact that they saved my life and I am getting out of there-- but one thing I can say-- my father was encouraging.

He himself was from Siberia. This is where he was born, of Polish parents, and then after the Revolution he ended up in Poland, then in Germany. And when Hitler started throwing everybody out, he went twice back to Germany because he loved it. So that's why he was very fluent both in German and in Russian besides Polish.

Did you speak any Russian as a child?

I did, not so much that-- we had to take it in school. So I did read the Anna Karenina in Russian, but you know what? If you don't use it, you really lose it. And I did. I did go with him after Stalin died and things loosened up because his mother and his sister lived in Siberia, in Omsk. So we did go over there at one time. It was a rather forgettable trip.

Really?

Yeah. But it was interesting in the way that I met his family.

Did you ever ask him why he helped you, they were willing to hide?

They never had any of their own children, and I don't know. I don't think I ever asked him. But I suppose the kid grew on them because they were taking risks for their life every day they kept me. He was arrested once for it and all that hiding, and this was going on for almost three years.

Did the other villagers know?

I suppose everybody suspected, but they never saw me. So that was, like I said, that one incident when I forgot about where I was and went out across the road. But this was a small village. The houses were spread-out, so it wasn't other than two houses around us. The other ones were much farther away.

So maybe they finally gave up. I really don't know. I think a lot of people were probably afraid that, if somebody is going to come and look for a Jew over there, they might go and kill them. I have no idea. Or some just didn't like Jews.

Do you know anyone else in the village who helped?

No. There was nobody. They were the only ones. The other one, like I said, maybe was about 2 miles away. This is where the other girl was hidden, which we didn't know till after the war.

It was a little crazy after the war when the Jewish organizations were coming out and trying to locate the children because one time when they came it was like they were going to grab me. So my mother literally grabbed me and we went into the forest, in there for a couple of days.

That was in 194--

This was already after the war. It was already after the war. I did, after the war, go to the Jewish organizations because my Polish father was trying to find out if there was anybody that survived. So my name was registered over there, and once a year I think we had to go over there and also go to the Polish court because he was my legal guardian.

But about that one cousin that showed up just before I left Poland-- his name was Avram Lofer, and he lives now in Berlin. He was in the Polish army. I guess he was in the army with the Russians, and he said that he was one of the first ones to be in Berlin when they came back.

So he was leaving Poland, and one more time. He wanted to check if there was anybody survived, and they told him about me. And he left, and he said he might be going to Israel. First, he was going to Berlin.

So when I went to Israel and I was asking the people that I was staying with if they know of him, nobody did. And I forgot about it. I asked also when I came to Gary, Indiana about a year later. And I believe my uncle wasn't very much into family or whatever. He didn't seem to know who he was either.

So it is a small world. 10 years ago, when Steve and I were just getting ready to get married, I get a call from my aunt from the Valley, from Encino, because they were the ones that were in Gary, Indiana when I came to the States. Then they moved to Israel.

And about 15 years ago they moved back to the States, but they came to live in Los Angeles area because one of their sons lives there. So she calls me literally about Tuesday. I was getting married on Sunday. And she was saying, do you know who is over here? I said, who? Avram Lofer, 15 years later. I said, who's Avram Lofer. So she told me.

He was coming from Berlin to see his daughter that was studying in Los Angeles, so he made a few calls to Israel, where is Sam Frank. They gave him the phone number. He didn't have any idea where he was calling.

He called, and they were 5 miles away. So he went to see them, and he saw my picture on their dresser. And he says,

this is Halyna. Where is she? Anyway, to make a long story short, I'm very close with his daughter. She's back in Berlin and trying to move over here because she really feels very strongly that she doesn't want to raise her family over there. Yeah.

And she keeps asking me all the time to come and visit her, and you know what? It is just like I get panic in my gut just thinking about going to Berlin. So we're saying that next year we're going to go. I don't know if I will or not.

When did you leave Poland?

1957. I went to Israel, and from Israel I came here. This is where my uncle was.

And so you were 20 when you left Poland?

I'm born in 1937, yeah, so I was 20 years old, yeah.

And what motivated you to do that? Tell me what-- you said a little bit about--

Oh, from Poland? I just couldn't wait to get out. The antisemitism I encountered on every-- at work, at school-- to give you an example, I was getting off the streetcar, and on the corner stays a guy that was obviously drunk and just stumbled out of a bar. And he looks at me, and makes a derogatory remark in the Polish slang with a Jewish accent. He says, why I'm not in Israel fighting with all the Jews? And this is a man I never saw in my life.

I had a terrible experience at work. I was working in a-- I quit school because I wanted to earn some money because I knew that I was leaving. I was processing my papers, I think, since I was 17, trying to get out of Poland after Stalin died. I stood in more lines. I was very determined to get out.

And the military institution that I was working with-- this one officer over there was giving me hell all the time. One time I'm the only one in the office, and he came in. And he says, well, since I'm Jew, is my vagina across, that kind of slimeball remarks.

So I threw a telephone at him, so I almost ended up in jail to attack an officer. And I was called to some high officer over there, and he hardly could speak any English. He was, I think, a Russian Jew. So he asked me when I will have my papers out. I never-- I was told never to go back to the office.

And I think within two or three months I finally got everything processed. I spoke with him Russian, so maybe that helped, too. I don't know. My feeling was he was sympathetic. So this is why I didn't want to stay there.

Just when, I guess, word got around that I was trying to get out from Poland, two little guys, at two different times-- they were Jewish. And they said, well, for them it's so hard to make the decision of moving because they have families and everything. They wished me luck.

And I didn't know them, but I don't know how the word got around, just to tell you the atmosphere that was in Warsaw at that time. It was horrible.

You were in Warsaw?

I was working in Warsaw. I went to high school in Warsaw, yeah.

And your parents were still--

Oh, yeah. I took a train, and streetcar, and stuff like this because it was not far from Warsaw, about 7 miles.

Let's go back a little bit to when the war ended. Tell me a little bit about when you found out that the war ended and what the atmosphere was like. What do you remember?



We were in a bunker, and I guess this was again very-- maybe it was in the night event that the Russian tanks-- everybody was already expecting them to roll through. My foolish father ran out, all excited, and boy the shooting started because they didn't know who it was. And it was dark still.

So he hit the ground and started yelling in Russian, and they finally-- he almost got killed the day of actual liberation. We were there with the flowers for everybody, and I was officially out. And even though everything was destroyed-- the house was like cut up in half almost--

From the shooting.

From the bombing, yeah. But it was freedom. The Russian soldiers-- they set up a command in one of those places over there, but I tell you what, there was a lot of shooting afterwards. I don't know who they were killing, that they were interrogating. And this was right in our backyard.

Also, there was one Russian soldier that was, I guess, killed, and he was buried not far, across the road again. So then when they had to take him out-- and the kids were all standing and watching. Everything is an open field over there.

But for the most part it was very nice with the Russians because they were playing with the kids. If they had any food-- they were always hungry. They were stealing food left and right if they could because there was-- I don't know how they were surviving.

The Hungarian soldiers that were with the Germans-- they were confiscating from the farmers all the food, cows. One thing it was-- when we were in the shelter, sitting in the ground, and the Hungarians were cooking, I guess, in the fields one day-- and they were taking the food away from the farmers, but they were very nice to people. They weren't killing them or anything. One of them gave me a doll one time.

So my father gave me a clay pot, and I went over there because you could smell cooking going all over. We had pillowcases of dry bread that my mother prepared for that thing and water and, of course, not kosher, bacon or the slabs of the lard that was drying out, that was preserved. This was the food that we were eating.

But I went over there, climbed over the fence. Like I said, the Hungarians were-- the Hungarian salt soldiers were very nice. If they patted me on the head, I wasn't afraid. And he cleaned out the pot because when I fell, filled it up with mashed potatoes and some kind of meat or whatever, that was like heaven. And he helped me climb across the fence and handed it to me. So this was towards the liberation already.

Right after the war, I almost got killed by shrapnel flying, but this was already from far away. This was not actually-- other than the beating from some of the Poles, Polish kids, not adults, Polish kids.

One thing my father prepared me when I started going to school and I was getting those beatings from the kids-- he says, I cannot go with you and fight with you all the time. you have to learn how to fight yourself. And whatever it takes, I had my little knife to go to school with, the little Petzl-- because one time when the kids burned my legs in the back-- they took those cotton-- I don't know how you call it, the brown fuzzy things that go in the water.

[INAUDIBLE]

I think so, yeah. So when they are very dry. I guess they burned them. So they were like little charcoal. They put some behind my legs, and they burned my legs. Now, that was--

When was that?

It must have been first year in school, and I went right way to second grade because I knew how to read and write already. And there were so many kids, different ages, because they didn't go during the war to school. So they didn't have too much space, so if somebody knew a little bit, they were put in a proper grade. So I had to learn how to fight.

And did you?

I did. And if I couldn't handle it myself, I did some homework for others or gave them my homework. I finally got them to see my way, yeah. Yeah, this is why I wanted to get the hell out of Poland. And I said that things at home were so unpleasant. They were. They saved my life, but things were just horrible, the fighting, screaming, embarrassment.

And I think I was able to help them more because he had his own business. He was actually, after the war, the-- he hired-- he had at one time about 10 to 15 people working, making rubber balls, and I was involved with it, too, and the squeaky toys with little cats, and mouse, and whatever.

And my mother didn't know how to read or write, so when it came-- the business in Poland was different in the Communist atmosphere. You couldn't have supplies legally or things like this. He was making phony bills with phony stamps, and I used to go, actually, at the age 13 and 14 all over Poland collecting the money and taking orders. But I still wanted to get out.

Do you remember anything in particular about your [INAUDIBLE]?

His name is Kazimierz.

Kazimierz?

Yeah.

OK, Kazimierz. --that differentiates them from the other villagers that-- why were they the only ones who were helping a Jew?

You know what? I think he-- I don't think education makes that much difference, but I think he was the only one that was more intellectual than anybody in the village. Believe it or not, even though he was brought up as a Catholic, he wasn't much into religion, but he was very friendly with the priest. They exchanged books, ideas. He had the radio that was listening to all the broadcasts from London, from Madrid about what was happening that we didn't know.

And maybe he himself also was-- as a young man, he was a foreigner in Russia, basically, even though he was born over there. Then he came-- he was a good man, and it didn't have to be that you pray to God so you are wonderful because a lot of those that were lying under the cross over there and praying to God-- then they would go and stick a finger, denounce people to the Gestapo.

So his motive was, if you are basically a good person, you don't have to have necessarily religion. If you are not going to have somebody-- if you don't want to hurt somebody else or being malicious to somebody else, that's your religion.

I don't know if I'm getting a little muddled right now because I had differences with him, too, when I started growing up, but I suppose maybe all the teenagers and their parents have their--

Did you have a sense of your Jewish identity growing up, besides the-- besides that antisemitism, did you have any sense of--

No.

--Jewish religion?

Not at all, no. First, I think, no Jews that I probably met that I knew that they were Jews that they were in hiding-- it was just before I left Poland, and this is why I think when I was standing in lines over there I met other Jews trying to get out.

In fact, it was such a [? big ?] thing. I think I had a couple of days with one young man. His parents were-- I was over in their house. I think they were very much communists, believed in the Polish-- the order. And they were-- one time, being in their house-- this was, like I said, just before I left Poland already. I didn't care who thought anything. I was getting out. They had controversial views about the state of Israel.

But I really didn't have any Jewish-- I didn't know, don't hear-- when I went to Israel, I didn't know what was Hebrew and what was Yiddish. I didn't know when they were talking. The people that I was staying-- this was my uncle's sister-in-law, and she was also from Poland. And to me she spoke Polish. To her husband she spoke Yiddish, and the kids talked Hebrew. And she was answering them in Yiddish. So for a while there I was a little farmisht didn't know which was which.

And as a child, how did you understand what was happening to the Jews?

Well, I tell you what, I think during the war or after I think I hated being a Jew. I said, why am I being hit on for just being born, that I wasn't Catholic? What would happen if I would be Catholic? They still probably would hate me because I still was a Jew.

So that was very uncomfortable, but I tell you only one thing. I was just telling that story to somebody else. When I was leaving Poland by myself, I took the train from Warsaw to Szczecin-- this is where we got on the boat. And there was so much hustle, so much buzz, the Russian Jews with their families speaking Russian and the Polish, and everybody was with somebody.

So I was standing over there with my little bag, and a man comes up to me. And he asks me if I'm traveling alone, and I said yes. He says, I want you to meet a friend of mine that I am saying goodbye to. She is traveling with her 14-year-old daughter, I think.

So he introduced me, and I felt like I belonged a little bit. And then he left, and came back, and brought me a box of candy. And every time I think about it I just burst out crying from his kindness. And when we were on that boat in Hamburg-- we didn't get off or anything-- that lady just began-- somebody from the deck there over there started screaming something in German. And I don't know what it was, but she just became livid and started screaming both in Polish and in German. So I don't know the German part.

And I think my association with not wanting to go to Germany comes very much from that one incident because she says, you murderers, you killers, you should be burned. And so whatever that person down there said must have really ignited an awful lot of feelings in her.

And when we came to Israel, she was going someplace else. I stayed in Haifa. And I wrote her once-- I don't remember her name anymore or anything-- once or twice, never heard from her. And so I don't know what ever happened.

But I guess the association of that incident and not wanting to go-- of course, I tell you where I live in Palos Verdes over there in Los Angeles area-- right kitty corner there was a German family, and Hilda Brenner-- I don't remember her husband's name-- and her parents came one time to visit. And I look at that nice, old, elderly man. And I said, [INAUDIBLE] so-and-so, I wonder what you were doing during the war.

It's the feeling I still get, but I'm sure that it's not only me. This is why I cannot understand how people are still willing to live in Berlin, but for that matter, why don't we all live in Israel? So I suppose everybody's got their own criterias.

After the war, what did you find out about about the Warsaw Ghetto and other ghettos and concentration camps? Did you find anything out? You had your own experience in the Warsaw Ghetto.

We were just going over there, and I tell you what. I felt almost afraid of having too much contact and trying to find out any more after this one time that I went-- I must have been around 16-- to this Treblinka.

I almost have no memory of that because I felt such a terrible fear and wanted to just get out. So I really kept myself, I

think, isolated from a lot of those things. My first husband's friend, Mendel Edinger-- he was older than me, and he was going to school with my husband. And they were roommates in Kansas City.

And apparently he-- he never would talk of-- I would talk about whatever experiences I had. He never would talk about anything. But he used to get up and scream in the middle of the night. Unfortunately about 12 years ago he committed suicide, and he had nice 3 kids.

Towards the end of his life he became very religious, started going to shul. The last time I saw him it was in a convention in Hawaii. I was already here in California, and he was still in Michigan.

And one time also we were for some fundraising for Jewish organization, and there was a psychiatrist, Dr. Crystal. He apparently has worked with a lot of Jewish immigrants as a psychiatrist, and somebody asked him, how do you account for a lot of those Jews that came here without anything and they became such financial successes? So the only thing he said is, you wouldn't want to have their nights.

But like I said, those were proud people a few years older than me, that they could really remember much more. So I was isolated, and maybe later on I isolated myself from it. I don't know.

And the stories that people told me when I went to Israel, how they were being-- on the way from Russia, this family that I stayed with-- they were being attacked someplace outside of Czestochowa by a bunch of Poles. So nothing changes. They still hate us.

Now, after the war and you started to study, did you-- how did you calm yourself, to gather, to come forward after all that happened to your family? Did your adoptive family give you more strength?

I think so. I really believe that, especially from him, I got a lot of, you are OK the way you are, and it's nothing wrong with it. Although one time, when I did go after the war to see-- no, after I left Poland, about 10 years after, I went to see them. And I guess I felt sort of free that it's OK to be a Jew, that you don't have to apologize for it. That's the feeling I had always in Poland.

And some of the people that were neighbors and they were living, also we went for dinner over there and something about cooking. And I said, well, I don't buy pork because I keep a kosher house. It's not that I wanted to-- it was my ex-husband that wanted.

My father felt so uncomfortable. He says, well, why did you have to say this? So isn't that something? Here he risked his life to save me, but he felt very uncomfortable that I brought it up that I should keep kosher house. Why did I have to say this? Isn't that something?

I guess there's remnants of [BOTH TALKING]

This was an adult woman with three kids and feeling free to say this, and I made him uncomfortable.

What was that like?

I said, well, I guess certain things are hard to change. They never did come to the States for one reason or the other, even though I invited them, and I said I was able to help them financially because after his business was taken away they just couldn't make it.

But that incident was-- my best friends are Jews, and we never turned them in, this kind of attitude. Some way or another I guess it was the right decision, and maybe because he helped me to think for myself.

How long were you in Israel?

Just about eight months. I was going to leave immediately, but after, I guess, my this Sam Frank-- I was going to come

straight to the States. He felt it would be easier at that time to get out of Poland because of the quotas, too. And so I went to Israel. But then the American consul wasn't very cooperative.

To help to enter America?

Mm-hm, because they felt that Israel needs young people more than United States, and it's another immigrant. But anyway, I was very determined to come over here for whatever reason.

Do you remember your trip?

From Israel over here? Well, it was interesting. The vice consul is the one that was-- he was a young man. He didn't want to give me the approval. But he went on vacation, and his travel agent that was arranging everything. I came over because there was no phones where I stayed, and he says, if you want to leave to America, you have to be tomorrow on a plane.

I guess there was some money changing done on my behalf. Anyway, so I got on the plane, and everything was laid by the time I got to Chicago Airport. When I got to New York, I was traveling with some woman, that her son-- we were able to speak Russian because she was from Russia.

And when we got to Chicago, it was so late already that my uncle never-- I guess he left. He lived in Gary, Indiana, which is about an hour, I suppose. So I went to stay with them, and then we contacted my uncle. So I was very excited, very nervous.

And I tell you what-- after three or four weeks I was ready to leave America. I said, this is America over there in Gary, Indiana? I said, I'm getting out of here.

And why was that?

It was-- do you know anything about Gary, Indiana? It was a dinky, really, town, smelly with all those refineries over there. And we didn't hit it off with my uncle and my aunt, so I said, well, it's time to move on. I was not afraid to make changes. This is one thing.

Where did you go from there?

I went to live with some kind of a cousin in Chicago, and at first, even though I hated Poland, I was very homesick because I was by myself. But I met a lot of foreigners, other Jews. It was what they call a [INAUDIBLE], getting together.

And I tell you only one thing, talking about how Jews still felt about Germans or the Poles. One of the guys was married to a German woman. He lost his whole family, his three daughters and a wife. His name was Job or something, and his German wife was much younger.

Anyway, we were playing cards one evening over there, and there was another Polish guy. The German wife was saying, how bad it was in Berlin with all those windows busted, and it was cold. So the other guy-- I don't remember his name. He says, all she had to do is hang up a few Jews from the window. They would keep the wind out. And he said this to me in Polish. Yeah, so gallows laughter, I guess, or gallows humor.

You say you kept a kosher house in your first marriage. Were you -- or are you frum?

No, I never was. It was just something that was important to, I guess, my first husband because his mother kept kosher house. But they were eating treif on the outside, so I said, what kind of nonsense is this? But again, everybody does what's comfortable for them. And I stopped later on when the marriage ended.

And did you observe the Sabbath [BOTH TALKING]

Well, we had the Friday night Shabbat dinner, but we drove on Saturday. So it was not in all sense religious type of thing. It's just that we kept kosher.

And how did-- what were your feelings about that? Was it comfortable for you to--

No, I really didn't like doing it. I really didn't. In fact, if anybody-- Judy, my oldest one, when I stopped buying kosher meat when we were already separated-- she said, I thought that this made us a little special, being a little different. I don't know if this was at that time that she decided that she wasn't going to eat red meat, or if that had anything to do with it, I don't know. A lot of young people not necessarily from kosher or non-kosher homes-- I don't know if they do that anymore.

But she did--

She did say this.

Got something from it.

Yeah, this is-- I remember when we were in the market and I was buying meat over there, and she felt that, I suppose, I was going through my whatever I was going through, that it wasn't important before, and we were no longer in a marriage. So I decided I don't want to be doing this.

Are any of your three children from your first marriage practising, observant Jews?

No. I tell you what, they went to day school, so they can daven very nicely. And I tell you what, when they made-- I never forget one time a lady that was instrumental, in a way, to introduce me-- in our meeting, my present husband.

We had one of the last Seders at home because now the kids are in different places. We can't get together anymore for those holidays that easily. And the three girls conducted the Seder. And she wrote in such a beautiful note. She says-- first of all, she was very much a feminist, the woman. I mean all her kids, including the daughters, are PhDs, et cetera, and she was just thrilled to see three young women like this perform such a beautiful ceremony.

How have your war experiences carried over into your post-war life?

Well, you know what? I really don't know. I don't know how I would be if I wouldn't have those experiences. Maybe, again, because a combination of my upbringing, that I felt that I was given a lot of freedom to make a lot of decisions and encouragement to be myself-- whether that had anything to do with the war I don't know.

I said I don't like fighting, but I sure as hell won't stay away from it when it comes down to it. I can raise a racket, too. But again, I remember what he told me. I cannot be with you there to protect you. If you are going to go to teachers, they are not going to help you. You have to fight your own battles.

How long did that last, the [BOTH TALKING]

The beating up? I was getting it quite often when I first got out. And some of it was downright dangerous, like those two sisters that-- they slapped me-- I had surgery since, but I was just covered with blood. But they would like to see me go because I gave back.

But like I said, even the nice people were indicating, we never did anything to Jews, like give them credit for it, that they didn't kill them, or turn them into the Gestapo, or something. This kind of attitude, I felt, was every place over there.

You were the only Jewish student in that school?

Yeah, in the grammar school and then in high school, too.

And did your parents get flak after the war?

You know what? Really, he kept to himself. He really-- there was-- they didn't have much of a social life. When he had like the Christmas dinner, the big thing was maybe a couple of the employees that worked for him. I couldn't remember them having friends.

She was busy after the war with her cows, and she was determined to be a farmer. And that didn't work out because we didn't have land, really, to speak of. It was so-- she had to pay for grazing, and she had to do this. So she worked herself to death and finally gave it all up because he was making a good living with the little factory, employed a lot of people over there to think of in a little village.

But then that got closed up right after I left. I guess the government didn't look very favorably on any enterprise. And I did go to see them one time, and it was such a void when I was notified that he died-- because she died first, about a year before him. And a letter comes addressed by him, and inside there is a letter written by a neighbor that he died.

He, apparently, quote, unquote, "got married," and I don't know if the woman-- they got married just so she would have the house. It didn't make any difference to me. All I did was ask her-- I sent money and asked her, would she send all the pictures and letters, if any, that he kept? She never did. I didn't want to go back there.

And did you-- you said you went back to visit them once.

Once.

Was that just--

One time, yeah.

And have you been back to any part of Eastern Europe at all?

No. No. I probably wouldn't-- this friend of mine from Chicago-- he goes all the time. He's still looking for his family. It's interesting, isn't it, how everybody reacts differently? His wife says it's just like an obsession with him because he was blue eyes, blonde hair, and was hidden by a farmer. He's very, very wealthy and keeps going there and keeps going there year after year.

And has he found anything?

No. But I guess he has to do what he feels he has to do.

Have you talked with your children a lot over the years about your Holocaust experiences?

I don't know if it was a lot. Maybe this is why they wanted-- Sheron started with the genealogy project, and then she wanted something more permanent about me. So I said, well-- when she found out about the Oral History interviews, she asked me if I would do it. I said, OK, but I don't think I can tell you any more than what I already told them.

Did you always know that your original family name was Rubin?

Yeah.

Because they were trying to change it?

You know what? I guess it was clear from-- I don't know. I was, what, about five years old, so I suppose when I found out that the cousin-- her name was Regina. She and her brother were killed, and this is why they never came back to get

me. And I don't know at what time I was told that name was Ruben and Frank was my mother's family's name because I said, I have no idea absolutely about any of my father's family. So this was probably with my father told me when my uncle gave him all the information.

And has your daughter, Sharon, found anything else out?

She started-- I have this one aunt over here in Los Angeles area. She's got two sons. The two sons don't know that much about it. One was born in-- I think he was born when they were in the camps in Germany after the war, before they came to the States. But I guess their family didn't discuss this much. They were the whole time in some place in Russia.

And they evacuated?

Well, this is how my uncle survived, and this is where he met his wife when they were in Russia. And this is where they were married. And then when they came back, this is the first time I saw him after the war, twice, while he was in the process of just getting out, going to Germany. So they were here only in Poland for a very short period of time.

And so the only other source would be his cousin from Berlin, and when his daughter was here just a week ago Sharon gave her the questionnaire, and talked to her, and asked her to check with the father to fill out as much as possible. But he somehow related, again, to my mother's family.

And Sam Frank, your uncle-- he is your mother's brother?

My mother's brother. He was the only one that--

What that the uncle that you were talking about?

Mm-hm.

And is he still alive?

No, he just died about six weeks ago.

And did you remain in touch with him?

Yeah, but, like I said, his wife and his sons-- they said that he was so impossible at the very end. I don't know what they meant by it. But this is my uncle, other than telling me that-- confirming the thing that my mother and father-- the physical looks, and that my mother was a tomboy, and et cetera. They were all butchers, one butcher-- my father was a butcher. My uncle was a butcher, and I guess the families kept intermarrying within the trade.

And I don't remember him. But whenever I ask him some questions, he didn't seem to have too many answers. And then I was not as much in touch with them other than when they moved here again to the States.

Did he did he say anything about his growing up and what that--

No.

Do you know if your parents had been religious?

I don't know. I don't know anything. He was observant, yeah, kosher and Shabbat. Yeah. I don't think any of his two sons are.

When did he leave Poland?

You know what? It had to-- as soon as the war was over, he was-- I was already in school, so I don't know. Maybe it



was like '45, '46. And they were in the DP camps in Germany. And he is the only one that had family here in the United States, so he was able to make it to the States. His wife's family all went to Israel, and this is where I stayed, like I said, in Haifa with one of the sisters.

And how did you find out about where everyone? Was it the Red Cross helping, the Jewish organizations after the war? How did you find all these people?

I didn't find any of those people. They found me. Yeah. They said my uncle came back to the village where we were and went to magistrate. Somebody told him that they think that his sister's little girl was with such-and-such family, and the same thing with this Avram Lofer. They came. They checked around and asked some of the people because I guess they had a store or something like this.

So they were the one that located me, and that was only my uncle and Avram Lofer.

And Avram Lofer from which side?

Mother's family. And this is--

Brother?

No, he, I think, would be like a first or, I think, second cousin to my mother. So before leaving the country, they gave it one more check, if there was anybody alive.

And there were the organizations in Warsaw. This is why we were also checking in every year if there is anybody inquiring. And they had our address to contact us, too, but nobody did. And it's amazing, after so many years, that people run into each other like I run into this Avram Lofer after the initial visit, 25-some years later.

Is he still alive?

Yeah, he's in Berlin. They have their business there.

And did he tell you about what he went through during the war?

No, other than the fact that he was an officer or a soldier with the Red Army. Or it was a unit that was Polish unit that was attached to the Russian army or something to this effect.

Why he-- it's interesting why he ended up living in Berlin all those years.

Did he stay in Russia right after the war? Did he go back to that -- since he wasn't born in Poland?

No, I think he was in Poland, and when I saw him he was in a Polish uniform. At the time, he was an officer. But he was leaving Poland, and he says that he was getting married. And one of the destinations was Israel, but I suppose, for whatever reason, they stayed in Germany.

Was his wife Jewish?

Oh, yeah, and they have this one daughter that I became very close with.

That looks like you? I'm sorry.

No, that we became friends. She was here, so she stayed in my house for a bit. And whenever she comes she stays and visits with us now.

Do you have family ties?

Oh, yeah. She calls me aunt. So that's OK. She's only about 35 years old. I can be her aunt. And this is the one-- I might go to Berlin if I don't change my mind. Running out of tape? I guess we covered the important parts.

Do you want to talk a little more, or do you feel--

Do you think there's anything more to cover?

There is [INAUDIBLE] subjects. You were saying that Sam Frank-- you didn't feel that same connection with him as with Avram Lofer's daughter.

Oh, yeah. Well, you know what? I guess we just-- when I first came over here-- the main thing was he was trying to marry me off I mean like in the old country, I suppose. You find somebody from Cleveland, from New York, as long as he was Jewish, to marry me off. And I said, hey, what's going on?

And he says, they are nice men. And what do you think, you're Elizabeth Taylor? Well, this is all I had to hear. So I was ready to split, and I did.

And did you-- how were you received in the States, besides-- not him, but I mean American the American Jews?

Oh, I felt wonderful. I really-- being with the Jews that I met-- and it was just such a small world. I was working-- after I went to school for laboratory technicians, I was working in a hospital. I meet at the station a Jewish doctor.

He was practicing-- he wasn't able to practice, but he was working in the blood bank. He was older. I guess he couldn't pass the test. He invited me to his house. They were Polish, German Jews. They were in the part of Poland that was Germany before.

So I went and met his wife, and he says, I want to introduce you to somebody that's from Poland. So I met those people, and they took me to some kind of a function. And I didn't keep in touch with them so much, but they introduced me to a person, a family. His name was Ike Benz. His wife was American-born. She was Jewish.

And in their house I lived, literally, when I didn't live with my cousin. They were-- most of them were refugees from Poland, from Germany, some of them from Russia but primarily Poland. And I just felt like this was a family. It was all the yiddishkeit over there, and a lot of people were coming from Canada. And I guess this is when I felt that it's OK to be a Jew, that you don't have to fight all the time.

And you were safe.

In that school that I went to for laboratory technicians I became friendly with a Ukrainian girl. This is another incident. And she was not Jewish.

Where is this now?

In Chicago, shortly after I came to live in the States. I went to her house. I was going to spend the night over there. And her mother was [? an aunt, ?] and she was showing me pictures. And she says, this is my-- no, I pointed out, there's a guy in a German uniform. I said, who is he? She said, this is my uncle. He was with SS.

I want you to know that it was after midnight. She was on the North Side of Chicago. I lived on the South Side. I left. I couldn't stay in this house. Talking about craziness, I took two-- Illinois Central and whatever, and I don't know what time I got home. But I just couldn't stay in this house.

Did you tell her why?

I don't remember. It was just like somebody put a needle in my back. It was such a terrible feeling. We stayed friends.

It's just-- I felt a little-- she was younger than me, and she had nothing to do with it, obviously.

She also-- we went together one time to Wisconsin. I guess we had \$10 between the two of us and spent a couple of nights over there on the lakes. And she introduced me to a friend of hers that was Ukrainian, and he wanted to date me. And I said, oh, I don't-- he's very nice, but he would bring me to his family. It would be again one of those Jewish things. So this is when I decided there is no way I would date somebody that's not Jewish.

So I became Jewish, despite not having any-- other than being born, not having any religious background. Those were the kind of feelings I suppose of trying to protect myself. In fact, I had in the hospital where I worked very unpleasant incident because my supervisor was a Negro woman, and her brother was working there for the summer.

He was just finishing his dental education, and he asked me for a date. And I said, well, I'm going to be in trouble because I don't want to offend his feelings. But at that time I already knew that I didn't want to date anybody unless they were Jewish. And when I told him this, he was furious. I was direct. I told him that this is how I felt. But I'm sure he didn't take it that way.

Didn't understand why.

Probably not. In fact, when I went to Israel, one of the sailors on the boat asked the woman that I was sort of traveling with-- he asked her if he could marry me. And she-- anyway, I guess he was-- I gave him the address where-- I couldn't communicate with him, obviously, because he was speaking only-- he was Moroccan Jew.

So when I was staying over there with my cousin, he came one time over there. And I call her cousin, the one in Israel, and she says, what will people say? He is a Frank. I guess they refer to the Moroccan Jews in derogatory terms, and Frank was the name. I said, well, isn't he a Jew? She says, you don't understand. You just don't want to be seen with him, OK?

Did you ever find out why that was the case?

Well, I suppose they are like second-class Jewish citizens, yeah. And I said to myself, well, there is a difference between Jews, too.

When did you-- when you came to the States, did you study?

Yeah, I went to school to get my something-- and this was another thing. When my uncle just wanted to put me to work some place in Hammond, Indiana in somebody's little store over there and I wanted to-- he said, when he did write to me, if I wanted to study in the United States. So I was excited. My God.

But anyway, when that didn't work out, staying with him-- because I was determined that I was going to go back to Israel. Oh, yeah, I just wasn't going to stay in Gary, Indiana, and we didn't hit it off as a family. But I stayed-- he introduced me to this cousin in Chicago, and I went to live over there. And she says, you have to get a little bit of training since you don't know English that well. And I went to school for laboratory technicians and then worked in Michael Reese Hospital, which is a big center over there.

Did you learn English fairly quickly?

Well, I think so. I had-- I can't get rid of the accent obviously to this day, but I had no problem of communicating. The first few months was a little tough. But I started reading with the dictionary. I attended some classes, but that didn't work out because a lot of them were with older students. And a younger person obviously can grasp things a little faster.

Had you learned any English in Poland?

No. Just before, I was sort of learning on my own with a dictionary with a little book before I came here, so I knew a few hundred words. But like I said, I was staying with a family that spoke only English, so there was no choice. I had to

learn.

And you were saying that your father in Poland gave you books, and you taught you to read, and he was one of the more intellectual people in the village.

That's right.

Did that instill some of that?

That's right. This was-- the books were my friends for a long time. I wish I could make more time now to read.

What were the books that he gave you?

Oh, I don't remember, the initial, little books. But a lot of it was even translation from Jack London stories over here, a lot of the Polish writers and the Russian writers. There was no television. The only other thing that we had together-- we played chess. He taught me to-- I was the only chess partner.

And I didn't know how it was that-- he was getting quite a few books out, like I said, from the priest from the village, never went to church, but he was getting-- and I was versed in the political thing because whenever he could, he got, even after the war, the transmission from Madrid, London. I think those were the two main channels that he was able to get. So you had information other than the information that the Polish communist radio or paper gave you.

And he had a radio during the war as well?

Yeah.

And did you listen also?

He did, but I don't remember that much of it because I guess this was a normal tune. I don't know how he got those things. I don't know if it was during the war or after the war only because after the war we were the only ones in the village that had electricity. He had like a little transmitter. So I really don't remember if it was during the war, after the war definitely, which-- listening to those broadcasts was forbidden, too, so it was like under the table.

Did you get news though from people coming in and out of the village or from Warsaw, newspapers, and rumors, and things [BOTH TALKING]

After the war?

During the war.

I think during the war it was only from people coming in and people that stopped by. And this is why he, I think, had some of the information of-- yeah, because I suppose it gets around who is helping out there, whether with a little bit of food, or a little bit of money, or even just giving information. But I don't think there was any newspapers other than the stuff that sometimes was thrown from the planes. Yeah, this was-- I really don't think that there was anything in writing that was distributed.

Was there ever a time when someone came to the house and you didn't have to hide?

No, I think I was always put in that little cellar under the table. And towards the very end, this is when they were looking after all the men, the Germans. This is when he was being put over there, too.

Put where?

In hiding my father, yeah.

Him also?

Yeah. They put-- maybe at that point they were not so busy already looking for Jews. They were just trying to shoot all the men around, not so much women, just the men.

Toward the end?

Towards the end, yeah.

Russian soldiers or the Germans?

Germans. They were withdrawing, and they were killing anybody that they-- why only men I don't know, but that was-- yeah, why only men? I don't know.

[INAUDIBLE]

Could be.

When you had to go hide in the cellar, how long were you usually there for? What would you do? What would you be--

It was dark. There was nothing I could do, just keep quiet. I don't remember the times. It was-- there were not that many people that were coming over. Like I said, we had the shutters over there that were always closed. The shutters were on the outside, and we had locked them from the inside. Doors were always locked. I don't know why that one time they let me into the garden. I guess just to get a little sun, I suppose.

Were you-- you said that when you first came to them having health problems.

It was-- I know it was full of lice, some boils on my head or whatever and sores on my feet. And I guess they had that stove with the coal, so after it cooled off a little bit he would put me over there to sit on top of it, like a little chair, to warm up the feet or whatever.

Did you have shoes?

Not when I came to them, but I don't know if I had them because I wasn't going anyplace. I don't remember that much about clothes at all. I just remember sleeping on those two black armchairs put together so there was no additional bed. And the dog was always to play with, too, if I was in the house.

How-- when you're in the camps, and when you were in [INAUDIBLE] sleeping on the bunkers, can you approximate how long that was that you were there?

I can only say that what it was warm when we were marched out of ghetto. But then the nights were getting so cold. This is why I was saying that I couldn't understand why I couldn't get in the middle to sleep between two bodies. So maybe it was just a few months.

And was your mother there?

She was there, and my father was there for a time. But shortly after, my father never was brought back. They were there for the nights. They were taken, apparently, to do the work during the day and brought on those big canvas-covered trucks at night.

It was a work camp?

And then one time my mother and my aunt-- I don't know about other people. I [INAUDIBLE] they didn't come. I don't

know how long it was that the mother-- the aunt one time came in the middle of the night, ripped clothes with blood running, but my mother still didn't come.

And then when-- I don't know how long was it after that that she did come. But by that point they were starting to take everybody out of there. And this is like a blur. I really don't know, other than the fact that we were, I think, put on some kind of a train. And that's when I was told later that this is the "train," quote, unquote, that was going to Treblinka.

How I got off that other than the fact that somebody says maybe I was squeezed through the bars when the train was going slow-- but I don't have any recollection of it. I think it was very crowded, and I don't know if it was crowded on the train or on the van, the track that we were brought in. I don't remember my cousins being there, or the aunt, or anybody. I don't recall.

Just your mother?

Yeah.

And what do you mean "the bars"? It wasn't a closed cattle wagon?

I don't know if it was on the truck or if it was actually a train. That's an absolute blur. The only thing is that they-- when I was told later that this was the train that was, quote, unquote, "going over there." But this is, again, hearsay. I don't know. I don't know the details of the separation even, and I don't really know who picked me up and got me to that abandoned factory over there.

That's like-- nobody to ask, too. But this is where my grandmother was, and they took the three kids. There was something wrong with that little boy, with the baby, because he was always screaming. And when they were changing his diaper or whatever they were, there was like an intestine coming out of his rectum.

And this was-- kids remember certain things, and it was just so strange. All the kids were standing there and looking at it. I don't know what was wrong with the little baby. I don't know what she was feeding him either because I don't think he was even a year old.

And you were there for a matter of days or weeks?

It seems like it was a while because it was so cold all the time over there. I don't remember what the heck we ate or anything.

Do you remember what you did during the day? Were you just hiding and trying to keep quiet?

I don't even remember that because, to think of it, I went over there after the war, and it was not that far. So it was just a bunch of sand surrounding that building and just bushes growing over there where the girl got us out.

And no. You know what? Just no recollection how long, what was I doing there, absolutely nothing. Five years old, I should probably remember some more details, but I don't.

Trauma often changes memory.

If somebody says-- look, so many died. When you read and hear the stories, like people blame themselves, are feeling guilty about surviving. I really don't think I had that feeling of feeling guilty. I just was saying, I guess, for some reason, my mother must have been praying very hard. And maybe I got a chance.

It's interesting. From my natural parents I have more association with my mother, from the second parents with my father. Yeah. A lot of things in life is luck.

what are the names of your natural parents?

Yente was my mother's name, and I just found out when I was talking to my aunt, when she was giving me-- my uncle's wife-- the names of all the siblings. And she says, and then it was Yancha I said, who is Yancha. I guess this was her Polish name. So her name was Yente. My father's name was Aaron.

And were saying before the interview that Yente was from a family with a lot of children.

Yeah, I thought that she was one of 11, but she was one of 10. I don't know where I got the 11.

And did they all perish?

Other than this one uncle, yeah. No, nobody survived. The youngest one apparently-- I don't know how my uncle found out this, that he just was killed days before the end of the war.

The youngest?

The youngest, this guy, Berek, yeah.

And Sam was--

He was in Russia some place, in Siberia.

But he was in the family there-- what-- in the middle somewhere?

Oh he was one of the older ones, yeah. There were two older ones and then him.

And what about your father's family?

Absolutely nothing, absolutely nothing, not one clue if he had siblings, nothing.

Do the names of your mother's siblings?

I have it written down, yeah.

And do you have any idea about whether they were married or had--

I think three of them were not married. The rest was married. I don't know about-- other than these three cousins, of any other ones. I don't know if they were older or if they had kids. I don't. Maybe I can probe my uncle's wife's memory a little more. Of course, for her this is only hearsay because she didn't know any of the people. She met my uncle in Russia. This is where they were married when they came back, obviously.

And her whole family survived. Some of them were killed. One of her brothers was killed during the liberation war for Israel. So I had really no other choice how to find out. Frankly, I never was really looking that much because when my uncle came and he said that he checked-- he tried to find and couldn't find anybody. So I just assumed-- and over all those years, until I left Poland, my name was with the Jewish organizations over there. If somebody does look, they go-- his mother's, father's name.

And I'm sure if somebody would have contacted them-- so how and where they perished I really don't know. If they were taken to the ghetto, chances are most of them died in the ghetto or taken from there to the concentration camps.

And the grandmother that you were with at the abandoned factory-- that was your mother's mother?

Right, and she was killed over there with her grandson. So many people. You start thinking about it. It's just-- you hear six million. Six million is just a number.

It's interesting that a lot of those Jews that I have met that I was so friendly with in Chicago-- there's never any talk about-- nobody was talking about how they survived, who they lost. There was not much talk about the war.

Why not, do you think?

I guess everybody just wanted to get on and start a new life. This is the only thing I can think of. They lived high-- some of them were married to Americans. Because this is-- the short time in Israel over there, but over here I really felt that they were my landsman, my family. We were very close. To this day I keep in touch-- we haven't seen each other for years-- with some of them.

What about with American Jews after the war? Did they want to ask you about what happened to you in the war?

Nothing specific really that much. Sometimes it just came in a conversation. But nobody got very personal to asking details. Oh, you know what? To think of it, when I stayed with his cousin, with the Schwartzs in Chicago, it was her brother-in-law from New York-- they ask questions. I remember they were asking questions.

And he discounted-- now, this is a Jew that was born here in the States. He discounted-- a lot of that is just made-up, honest to God, [? Noel ?] Schwartz. And I said, well, he can think whatever the hell he wants to. So if this is a Jew that doesn't believe, about all those goyim that say the Holocaust never happened? It was-- yeah, now that you brought it up, yeah.

Did you respond to him?

You know what? I don't remember at the time. Here I am with this fancy family. I felt a little intimidated living over there. But it was either staying there or-- even the cousin, Irene-- I was telling Sharon, telling the kids that one time we are sitting at the dinner table. She's got some fancy guests.

And she's saying some meises about, it never happened. The woman is making up stories. So I said to myself, do I call her a liar? Do I-- this is her house, so just forget about it. She was saying some nonsense stories that really never happened.

You mean--

About me to those girls, like I wasn't there even.

About something that--

Yeah.

--something that happened to your mother--

Right, right. I don't remember the details of it, but I said to myself, how do you handle that? Let it go.

That's strange.

Yeah.

Did they know that you lost your family during the Holocaust?

Yeah, this is why-- when you brought up if people were asking, here it is a guy that obviously is not stupid, read papers, heard what was happening. And he was sort of discounting, that a lot of it is like made-up. So I guess at that point maybe I said to myself, what's the use of telling somebody-- discussing something like this with a person that doesn't believe it?



Did you feel you had to-- you had to keep silent after that?

Well, only with him in this situation. That was obviously a very funny period because they were quite affluent. I'm, all of a sudden, in a very fancy house, and John Wayne is right over there for dinner one time or something like that. So I didn't know who the heck John Wayne was till they showed him to me on television. But I thought maybe all those intellectuals over there think differently than normal people do.

But that didn't make you feel that you couldn't tell other people?

Oh, yeah. No, no. I think the story that I said today I did tell before, and it didn't feel like it was anything wrong with saying it. It's just over there I felt funny, especially when somebody discounts-- this was only what 10 years after the war, in the 12 years. So I didn't. I said I lived with them, but I was feeling closer with the [INAUDIBLE] friends

What would you say to someone today who discounts the Holocaust?

I certainly would not feel intimidated of telling them how I feel about it and that it did happen because I, myself, lost my whole family in the war in those atrocities.

And the cruelty of that soldier or the SS man that patted my cousin, my little cousin, shot him-- we hear those atrocities happening to some degree right now on the streets. For no reason somebody comes and kills you. But those things happened because we were Jews, and they were going to clean us out. They were going to free the world of the Jews.

The Germans, the Poles, the Ukrainians-- I didn't know how it was in Russia, but Ukrainians were very, very antisemitic. And when I saw the picture of that guy in that album, the SS man-- I guess you have to keep reminding yourself that death is going to continue. And I guess the only thing is is being alert. I don't know.

Like my cousin in Berlin now feels that it's just a matter of time before it's going to be open antisemitism again, she, his daughter. Yeah.

And Avram?

I don't know how he feels. I guess for him, at this point, after all those years, Berlin is his home. It's a small Jewish community. I just met recently another man from Berlin. And apparently extremely wealthy family. So he's starting to develop some assets over here, buying real estate, and was thinking about bringing his family. But he is not going to buy a house probably. He'll just rent it to see how his wife feels about living over here.

Is she German?

Jew, German Jew. She was born there, too. I think they are the Iranian Jews that settled in Germany. So I guess the feeling is that I don't want to continue anymore if you-- this is already like--

No, please, what were you going to say?

It's just that the Jews over there are beginning to fear again that something like the Holocaust can repeat itself because Sarah, my cousin, is-- right now for her over there--