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Meyer. Meyer Galler?

Galler, yes.

John Angel Grant is on camera. And I'm Anne Feibelman. Meyer, tell me where you were born and what year.

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

And what size was your family?

We were four people and a grandmother-- two brothers and parents and a grandmother.

And let's see. What was your father's business? What did your father do?

My father, he worked on a textile-- in beginning, he worked on a textile loom in a factory. And then he bought a textile loom and worked by himself. And they manufactured. Most of the city lived on textile, this kind of thing, yes.

And was your family very religious? What kind of religious life did you have? Synagogue? Shul?

I attended synagogue till the age of 14. My father was religious. My mother was less religious. oh but we observed the Sabbath every week. In the evening. My father used to pray every day. When I was home, he insisted I should go with him to the synagogue.

Did you go to a secular school, a religious school? What kind of school did you attend?

I started with a secular school. Let's see. No, we can call it a religious school, I started. And I was deeply involved in religious studies till the age of about nine. Then I had an incident in the cheder. The rabbi pulled me from the ear and tore up half an ear. And after this, I said, I don't go anymore to the school. And I switched to a private secular school. You could call it like a high school.

And was there any problem with being a Jew going to a secular high school? Or it was open?

The secular school was a Jewish school because the normal high school that existed had about 1,000 students. And very few Jews could attend the high school. It was in about 1,000 students, maybe about 10 or 12 were Jewish people not more. So the Jewish population was forced to attend private high schools.

And I attended one of them in our city, which was about 60,000 Jews. They had about six or seven high schools, including a Hebrew school, a Yiddish Gymnasium, and about four or five secular, general high schools. And I attended one of them.

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

So you went to a secular high school. When do you first remember the first time you met with antisemitism?

See, we didn't think it is antisemitism. It was a fact of life because we knew we lived in this region. And if we would go farther out of town where most of the Polish peasants also lived, there you had to be careful because they could throw stones or so on. But we accepted it as a normal way of life. We didn't think it is antisemitism at that time. At least, I didn't think.

All right. Do you remember the first sign of Hitler coming to power? What do you remember?

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Oh, I remember well because I graduated high school, the private high school which I had to go to special. They call it external exams in order to get the matura which made you eligible to go to university. And I went in 1933. I attended university in Warsaw.

At the beginning, I started in Vilnius, but Vilnius was a much poorer Jewish population than in Warsaw. And I could only survive on tutoring other students. And after several months, I transferred from Vilnius to Warsaw. Warsaw was much richer. And there I had enough tutoring to survive on my own.

What were you studying?

I studied mathematics because I was a very good mathematician at high school. But during the year I saw the conditions in Poland. I saw that I couldn't get a job with the government high school. And the Jewish high schools were on a very low budget because they were supported only by the students' tuition and fee, which was very low.

And it was very high competition because in my town, for example, most of the teachers came from Galicia, which is Southern Poland at that time. And see, in competition with them, they used to be paid very low. And I saw that I'll be in bad shape if I continue my mathematics.

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

So after the first year in mathematics, I switched to Agricultural University in Warsaw. And there, I already started to feel antisemitism as it is.

In what way? Do you remember?

First of all, at that time, Hitler came to power. And in Poland, Pilsudski was a liberal man. He died in '34. And the people who followed him were more anti-Semitic, more inclined to please the Polish anti-Semites. And I felt it on each step at school.

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

And another fact was that, for example, they had a dormitory. They had many dormitories, but no Jews could enter a Polish dormitory. Ukrainians, White Russians, Poles, yes.

in 1927, '28, the Jewish community in Warsaw, with assistance, I think, of Joint, built a dormitory. It was far away from the schools, in Praga, which is a suburb of Warsaw. It was, I think, a five or six-story building. And there, all Jewish students from all kinds of schools could enter and live there. So we had to pay for this.

And being there, for sure, I became more aware of the problems involved because almost everybody had some problems. And nobody wanted to be-- at that time, transportation was quite complicated because the school was at the other end of the city, in the Polish sector. And in order to travel there, it had to take me about an hour. So I used to lose a lot of time. But I was young, and it was acceptable to me. I knew I have to suffer before I entered paradise.

But then, at school, what happened? We had some medical assistance there at school. And it was included in the tuition and fees that we paid. But each time, if you wanted to go to a doctor, you had to buy a ticket. And the ticket was in the office of the Polish student organization.

And they were anti-Semitic, almost officially. They had signs. I'm sure there was a crucifix in the office. And there were signs. We demand our schools to be free of Jews. And imagine we had to enter and buy the ticket. They would sell us

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the ticket, but it was a very unpleasant situation.

The Polish student organization also had a cafeteria. And the first year, we used to come there sometimes to eat and study there if there were tables available. But the next year, we were forbidden to enter. So it is not a place to study and even to eat. We had to go farther away.

Sometimes we traveled three, four miles in order to go to a restaurant because we looked for a cheaper restaurant. We didn't go to any one that is expensive. And this was, again, another blow that came to the students.

And then, in '35, the Polish student organization decided that Jews can sit only on one bench. It was mainly in the main auditorium, where most of the classes were for the first three years. And we had also our own organization, Jewish organizations for-- in the five years' classes, we had maybe about 60 Jewish students. This was-- I think I mentioned it. It was in the Agricultural University. In other schools like Warsaw University, Polytechnic Institute, it was all the same conditions or even worse.

And the student organization decided that we won't sit down on the benches. And for the next three years, if we had classes in this auditorium, we are standing outside the benches, at the wall facing the lecturer. This lasted till the beginning of World War II.

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

Were you a member of any youth organization for Aliyah?

No, I was sympathizer. Greenbaum at that time was in charge. He was the head of the Allegemane the general Zionist organization. I was a member of this, of the student section of this organization.

And what happened after you graduated?

Oh, I had problems because in the last two years, I switched from pure agriculture to nutritional science, which was a department in the same school. And I had to take additional year and a half of Chemistry and Biochemistry, these type of things. And I submitted everything, including my thesis, in 1939, a month before the war started. And I had to take my finals in October.

But the war started. And at that time I left the city because they ordered able-bodied men eligible to serve in the army to leave. And I got my assignment. I traveled to Grodno, where I had to come to appear to my superiors or something.

And it was a very hard way to come there because all the railroads and everything were bombed and didn't work. Most of the time, we had to travel or join some farmers who, with wagons and horses, used to go there. But when I came to Grodno, the war was over.

So you were drafted into the Polish Army?

You see, as a student, I had some kind of deferment. But in case of war, I had my assignment. I had to come to Grodno. This was an infantry division. And I had to come to Grodno, which I followed. It was appeal from the Warsaw president, appealed to all able-bodied young people to leave the town and go to their destinations. And that's what I did.

And when did you arrive?

It was already the 17th or 18th of September. It was about almost two and a half weeks. But I left Warsaw not immediately. I left Warsaw about the 6th or the 7th, so it was about 10 days.

And then what happened?

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

And then I started communication with my professor, who remained in Warsaw. And I asked him, should I come to take my exams? And he said, yes, I discussed it with the German authorities. His wife was German, and he spoke a very fluent German. And they promised that they'll let-- they closed the schools, but all the people who submitted their thesis and have to take their final exams, they let them take the exams.

And I came to Warsaw. You had to cross the border between Russia and Germany. It wasn't dangerous, but still there were some problems because this was illegal, basically. And I stayed in Warsaw for several months under the Nazis. And I waited for permission to take the finals. It never came.

But I was lucky because I worked in Warsaw as a student. After I started in the nutritional science department, I worked in a oil emulsion factory. The brother of the Jewish Community Center in Warsaw, he owned it. And I worked for him before the war.

When I came to Warsaw, they admitted me back to this work, even it was already under German supervision. And this gave me a pass. They call it a [NON-ENGLISH], which means a useful Jew. And with this pass-- sometimes they used to make some searches or so and take off people from the streetcar. But this gave me the right to continue my trip. They never took me off. But I had to suffer with the rest of the population because they had problems with water, electricity, this type of things. It was a very hard life during the several months.

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

They had a similar department like ours in Warsaw. It was the Polytechnic Institute in the war. And I came there. At the beginning, I had difficulties because there was a committee of students who left Warsaw the way I left. And this committee screened students who are eligible to be engineers in a communist society or not.

Let's see. I was at the beginning, and they rejected me. Also my background-- my father was a worker. He was good, but they had some reservations about my background with Zionism. But finally the committee voted to admit me.

Why did you go to Russia?

There wasn't any better place to go at that time. I know many people crossed the border to Lithuania, but this was only people with-- you needed a lot of money. little money. You come there, and it was better than in Poland, but not much better. And there was a large concentration of refugees from Warsaw, from the western part of Poland, which was under the Nazis.

And what year is this?

It was still in '39, beginning '40.

And during this time, did your family stay?

Well, they had to. They stay. In Bialystok, there was no ghetto at that time. They stayed in their house. And everything was normal except the conditions were different. My father worked the way he used to work. I don't think they confiscated the loom that he owned. But they let him work in this.

OK, so you're in Russia. And what happened?

I went to Lvov. And in May I got my diploma. And there, they immediately-- am I loud enough? No?

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Oh, I think--

Yes. Yes, you are. Fine.

I had a question. Why did you know German?

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

And Russian?

Russian? I started to speak Russian when I was born. My parents spoke Russian and Yiddish. And the Russians-- Poland became only independent, really independent, in my part of Poland, in 1920, '21, after the failed invasion of Russia. When I went to-- simply during the years, I forgot.

But later, in the '30s, when I started to work on my thesis, I needed a lot of books. And the books, German books-- or English were even more expensive than the German books. I felt I wouldn't be able to afford it. And they had a Russian bookstore in Warsaw. And the same books-- translation, sometimes original books-- you could get for a tenth of the price. And I thought I could save some money. Then I started to restore my Russian.

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

OK. So you got your degree after about five months. And then what happened?

And then they assigned me immediately. When you graduate from university in Russia, they give you an assignment to work there. I know it's possible to get on your own, but they don't like it because they try to put you where they need you. And they assigned me. And I was lucky that they gave me an assignment.

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

And what was the city?

Lvov.

Spell it.

L-V-O-V. Yes. In Polish, it's LwÃ³w. Now, it was the third-largest city in Poland.

And what was life like for you?

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

And how long did that job last?

This job lasted about May till-- less than a year.

What happened?

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Then, in Lvov, it was about three months before the war started between Germany and the Soviet Union. I had a friend who went to Lithuania. And he wrote to me that there the conditions are much better. And at the time this was Kaunas. It used to be the capital of Lithuania before Vilnius became the capital.

He told me that they are building an oil and margarine factory. And they hire a lot of specialists. And he talked to the manager of the construction and [INAUDIBLE]. And they sent me an invitation to come there to work. For sure, I had to go to my managers and tell them the story that this is more specialized than the work I'm doing there, and they let me go.

Now, what were bad about the conditions where you were?

In Lvov? I don't know whether you can call it bad because, according to the Soviet standards, I had a good life and a normal life. It depends what standard you measure with. So I couldn't say. I had enough to eat. I had fruit, vegetables. So I couldn't complain about this.

And one thing that I have to admit, I didn't feel any discrimination that I felt in Poland. In Russia, I felt that I'm one of them. I never felt that discrimination in Russia.

A worker?

A worker, yes. They used to pay me. I used to have to come and do my work during the time I have to be, although I used to work overtime because I was worried about the production. We had several shifts, particularly during the season in the summer of 1930. And I felt if something will be spoiled or so on-- this is a very tricky production, particularly when you deal with live fruit and vegetables, this type of thing. So I had to be careful. But I managed it.

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

What was the name of the town?

Kaunas-- K-A-U-N-A-S. It used be the capital of Lithuania before the war.

[INAUDIBLE].

Yeah.

Vilna. And then what happened?

In Kaunas, I was about three months. No, I married immediately when I graduate school, in 1940, in May. I married. My wife was a student in Warsaw, and we are going out together for about four years, five years. And she came from Lublin. And there, Lublin was under the Nazis. And she escaped from Lublin and came to Lvov.

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

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

In general, when I went to Kaunas and started my work, it was-- in the beginning it was a lot of commotion and

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disorder, particularly under the Russians and the new enterprise. But it was, I would say, the same like any other new enterprise. And I worked there till the beginning of the war.

The evening before the war started, my wife called me on the phone and told me, oh, everything is dark in Bialystok. And they say the worst at us. And I simply said, oh, they are saying it for two years, since the Russians, since the war started in Poland in September. No, no, but this time it's serious. I made it like in a joke.

And she asked me even to send some goods to your parents because they started to complain. They don't have enough food. And they asked for chocolate-- not for them, but with chocolate they could get other food that they needed, and they changed it to the Germans. This was on the 21st of June, 1941. And this is the last time I talked to her.

Do you know what happened?

I know all perished. And I had my brother. And there was-- my grandmother died before the war. But my two parents, my brother, and there was his wife's sister. And there was another lady. No trace.

I was in Bialystok later, in 1960. I went to stay several days. I couldn't linger there. I stayed one night, and I felt I cannot stay in this town. And I didn't find anybody that I recognized in entire city.

Yes, one person that I recognized was the janitor of our house. Basically, she recognized me because I came to see what's happened to the house. It's not a house. We rented. We were renters. It was a building which had, I think, about four tenants, a two-story building, a brick building.

And this building was already torn down, and they planned to build something else. So I couldn't find anything. But because I was going around the yard looking for it all, and she came out and asked me and told me, all right. You are there and there. This is the only person I recognized in Bialystok. And it was non-Jewish.

Did she know what had happened to your family?

She couldn't know because the house was already in the Polish section of the town. And my family had to move out. I don't know. It was about three or four months later. They moved out the Jewish ghetto where, I understand only from-- I have a cousin who survived the ghetto and survived Auschwitz. But the cousin knows only a little what happened.

And they told me where they lived, which I know because it was a cousin of ours who had a larger house. And they moved from our place to his house. And they survived till 1943. But what happened to them I don't know.

So tell me more now. You are in your new job in the margarine and oil factory? And how was it?

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

And how long were you in that job?

Till the war started.

And then what happened?

Then I stayed-- the war started on the 21st. I stayed till the 23rd. Nobody came to work. And when I saw that-- and the entire city was bombed, the airport, everything. So there wasn't any reason for me to linger there. And I didn't have any roots there.

When I decided to go back to Bialystok, I didn't know how the situation in Bialystok. I tried to make a phone. There was no phones, nothing. Everything was already inoperable.

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And in the evening, I boarded the train from Kaunas to Vilnius. But we didn't make it to Vilnius. The tracks were already torn, and the train couldn't pass. And the rest of the road, I made on foot.

And I came first to Vilnius. And Vilnius was already entirely on fire. But from Vilnius, I had to make a right turn to go south, to Bialystok. And I started on this way. And then I see the Russian Army in disarray, some with weapons, some without weapons. I running back. And they started, where you going? The Germans are already there. Now I thought indeed it doesn't make any sense for me to enter the Nazis there and be under the Nazis. And I started to go together with the Russian Army.

And for sure, on the border, I stopped. I thought the Russians will stop them. But I came to the border. The city of Minsk is close to the border. And we came. The city was still OK, intact. In the morning, we got up. The city was on fire.

And most of the men, some with families, went-- in Minsk, there is a big freeway that leads to Moscow. And most of the people in the army were going this way, toward Moscow. And I started the same way. And this way I started my exile to Russia.

And then what happened?

One thing you have to say-- sure, food was very scarce. But whenever we stopped and there were peasants, Russian peasants or so, they used to feed us. Sure, mainly bread it was.

I couldn't say that they were anti-Semitic, although I'm certain they recognized that we are Jewish because the Russians, as well as the Poles, will recognize a Jew immediately because the Poles are even more monolithic. They are 92% Poles, you see. So they can recognize immediately. And the same was the situation in this part of Russia, White Russia.

But they used to bring sometimes milk, if they had, and all, but basically-- we stopped in some-- I forgot-- smaller towns. But the major town was Smolensk. In Smolensk, there was already a committee formed by the Russians. And they took us from the station to some kind of cafeteria and gave us something like a meal, the best meal that they had.

And I also had to go to the military induction center there because it was already-- the first city that had lights in the night was Smolensk. And there they looked at my document. It was all checked. And they told me that I cannot go to Moscow because Moscow is a city off limits to refugees. And they gave us tickets-- not tickets. They simply gave papers so we can travel. And I traveled to [Buguruslan which is southeast of Moscow.

When did you arrive there?

Oh, it took several days, maybe a week or so.

And what happened when you got there?

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

Now, you worked on the farm for how long?

Not very long because I was called to the induction center in the city from the collective farm. And there, in the induction center, they gave me an assignment to go toward Kyiv. And Kyiv, at that time, was forming a front to resist the Germans.

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No, immediately, maybe in a week or so, I left with the army toward Kyiv. And what happened on the way, Stalin decided not to have Western-born people in the army, in the [INAUDIBLE]. And that was an executive order by Stalin to remove all these people, which involved Poles from Western Ukraine, and Ukrainians from Western Ukraine, the Jews, us all, to remove them and send them to a labor army.

And so immediately, they took us all together and shipped us to Central Asia, where they needed labor because they evacuated a lot of machinery equipment as well from Western Ukraine to Central Asia to be able to operate because they expected a long war, which was indeed a long war. So I was transferred to the north of Almaty. Almaty is the capital of Kazakhstan.

When I came there, we were involved in the labor army. Most of the work we did on construction, digging foundations-- because they had very primitive equipment, so mainly with shovels or so-- for the future factories. Certain things, we simply had to correct it and make it suitable for the factories or so. I worked there about three months on this job.

And then what happened? They had a tremendous cannery, a very large cannery in Almaty because the area is rich in fruit and vegetables. And the technical manager of the cannery in Almaty, he was a member of the Communist party. And when the war started, he volunteered to go to the front. And he left. And they started to search for somebody to replace him.

And then, in my documents was that I was in nutritional science, and I got it from Lvov Polytechnic Institute, and I worked in this and this job. And they sent me from the labor army to work in this cannery. For sure, they had several other people working in the same area. They had trucks, so we used to travel in trucks. And they used to bring us there.

And the cannery used to pay me a full payment. But the money had to go to the labor army. They used to give me a better allowance only, so I can, if I have to do something, better clothing or so on. But the basic salary used to go to the labor army. This is with all there, even the doctor, if he worked. We had to go, had to give the money-- had to be paid to the labor army. And we used to get something like this.

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

Then suddenly I was called to the office. It was part of the personnel office there. And I came there, and the manager said, oh, the guy is not here. He said, would you come later? He told me what time to come.

You know, I felt something is wrong because they were already starting to arrest Western people in Russia at that time. In the same city there are previous arrests. But I couldn't understand why they would take me.

Why were the arrests started? The Russians arrested people?

The Russians arrested people.

To do what? Or why?

No, first of all, they arrested-- there were a double purpose. First of all, they needed young people to work in the camps, for example. And it's cheap labor. They don't ask you whether you want to go or not. But as a free person you don't have to go, even in Russia.

And secondly, they simply tried to eliminate maybe anti-Soviet activities in the population. And I assume they didn't-- it was Poles who came out at that time. They released all the Poles from the camps and let them go. And many of them were officers in the Polish Army or so. And I assume some of them did some spying.

And they had contact with London. They had a legation, which is like a consulate, in Almaty and Tashkent and then in Funza, some other capital of a Soviet Republic. And I'm certain they found something. I worked a little on this, and I

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know that they found some briefcase with some documents that the officer left.

And there was another reason, a third reason. They were dissatisfied with the army formed by the people who came out from the camps because this army said they won't fight with the Russians. They can go only outside, to Great Britain, to France, this type of thing. And this was a serious problem. And they decided, by arresting more people, they'll have all three purposes together.

Well, they wanted, first of all, to cut off relations with the Polish government in London. They had with them an agreement. In order to cut off, they needed good reasons. So they found there some material because, finally, at the end of '42, they severed relations with the government in London. And they formed their own Polish government and their own Polish army, which later took part in the liberation of Poland. So there was a lot of politics involved.

And there are labor problems because most of these people didn't-- even if they are young and able-bodied, most of them Stalin didn't want in the army. They feared that they may defect because I assume they had some defections in the first days of the war.

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

Now, when you were called to the office and then told to wait, what happened?

No, I was told to come later. But I didn't come back. I talked to some people, and I heard that this man and this man was arrested. And I didn't stay overnight in my house.

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

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

And I went with them. And they brought me. This was the internal prison in Almaty, which is mainly for political prisoners. And there I was, after identification and signing the papers or so. Even they didn't present the accusation that they have. I asked them. And they said, oh, this will come later. And I was put in prison.

How long were you there?

I was in prison about 11 months.

And what was it like in prison? What happened? The first day, what did they do?

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

And they watch you all the time so you won't go, you don't commit suicide or something like this. There is a special guard who opens-- there is a small, circular eye. You can see what is going on in the room. And I was alone.

And then, after three or four days, they saw that I'm already completely adjusted to their needs. They let me out and brought me to a solitary cell. I was alone. And the investigation started.

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For sure, I didn't eat the bread. I couldn't eat anything. So they told me to take the bread with me. And I took it with me to the cell, which was very important because the bread was the only source of nutrition. They used to give you some watery soup or so, which was meaningless.

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

And in the solitary cell, what was that like?

No, I had a bed, which was embedded in the cement floor. You couldn't move it. And there was some window underneath the ceiling, a small window. You couldn't see anything. You had maybe light about three, four hours a day, even if it was in May. And they watch you all the time. And the most harassing thing was the investigation, the interrogation.

What were they like?

Oh, they used to take me about 10:00 in the morning and return 5:00 afternoon. And they used to take me to the investigator. And then 10:00 in the night till 5:00 in the morning, so I never could sleep enough.

And you get exhausted. And you come to this kind of a situation that you don't care what you'll be. Only let me sleep. Let me eat a normal meal.

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

What did they do in the investigations? What went on?

The main thing is they didn't have any material on me. I had some friends who were arrested together with me. One was my brother-in-law. And each of them said something.

I had the only person in-- it was a group of four they made it. They make it in groups. And I was accused at the beginning of being a spy, counter-revolution, and group counter-interrogation. There is a separate-- what do you call it? A separate--

Accusation category?

No, no. They have a word for this in English. This is accusation, but each of them has a paragraph in the code. So it was a separate paragraph. And it was three paragraphs like this.

And for sure, I tried to debate with him. Most of the time he let me sit, but a very narrow chair so you couldn't fall asleep. If you fell asleep, you would fall down. And in the morning and in the evening you are so exhausted, you are willing to do everything that they want you to sign.

But I resisted a long time because I felt-- not I felt. I thought if I'll resist, they may let me go, which was foolish. If I would not resist and would sign immediately, I would go to less suffering and with the same results.

So what happened?

And at that time, it turns out because they didn't have any hard evidence, my case didn't go to a trial, to court. It was decided by an administrative committee that they had in each republic. And they simply signed the papers that they got from the prosecution. They gave me 10 years in prison, in camps, and five years in exile.

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For what crime?

Well, they dropped spying. They dropped the-- but they left group counter-revolution and counter-revolution, the two. They did a favor to me, the person did. The warden told me, you are lucky. According to this, during wartime, you deserve the death sentence. So, this is OK. I was indeed glad that I avoided it.

And then what happened?

I was taken to them. From the prison, I was taken with a group, maybe about 300 people or so. We had to carry our things on our backs. And we were taken to the railroad station. At the railroad station, there they packed us in. They call it special compartments.

The train itself is called-- I forgot the name of it. It was a czarist minister, [NON-ENGLISH]. Yes. He invented this kind of train for prisoners that they shipped to Siberia, to other places. But what happened? He designed it for six prisoners. And they packed us-- we are about 26, 27 people in a compartment. You couldn't move. You couldn't sleep. If you wanted to change your position, everybody had to change position and this type of thing.

And in this way, we traveled to south of Tashkent. There was a camp, [NON-ENGLISH]. But this was only temporary. They didn't tell us where they are taking us. But they are coming to this camp. People told us, oh, you are here? They'll take you some other place.

And there I was maybe a month, a month and a half. They used us for light work, cleaning the yards and this type of thing.

But with bread was bad because after the prison and being hungry almost the entire year, we could eat without limit and live. And there wasn't because they gave us-- a normal person of this type, they call it a transit camp. We used to get about a pound of bread a day. And this is all. The rest was a little watery soup was all. And we could eat maybe five pounds.

But we overcame. We dreamed about going to the camps where it will be better. At least you have freedom to move around within the limits of the camp.

And indeed, in about a month and a half or so, the train came. And they took us to a camp called [? Aktiubinsk, ?] which is the western part of Kazakhstan. It was about several hundred miles, but we took about three days to travel there by train in the same conditions that we had before, in the compartments the same, packed like sardines, and the only food was the bread.

They used to give you some dried herring, but you couldn't eat it because you would become thirsty. And water they gave you only once a day, and only a cup of water. So you had to be very careful. Some people used to cry and so because they wanted to drink, and no water. Only once a day.

But you learn, with time, how to behave, how to do things in order to avoid the problem. And later, I was in many other they call it shipments. And I used to throw out there. I used to give it to somebody because I knew that if I'll eat the herring, I would like to die from thirst.

Anyway, I came to [? Aktiubinsk. ?] And there we went-- a month we are in [NON-ENGLISH], which-- the same. They used us for some type of work. It was already winter. It was in-- I don't remember. Winter is September, October there. The winter starts early.

So they used to ask us to clean the snow or to collect fuel for the kitchen and this type of work till-- encouraging us simply to avoid epidemics. Of course, the prisoners came from different parts of Russia, and some of them maybe with typhoid or so. During the war was a lot of typhoid there in Russia.

And there I came. And we started-- after the quarantine, we went to the regular zone, where we lived in barracks. The

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barracks were about maybe 60 yards in length, maybe about 25 or 30 in width. And they had continuous berths, and in two layers. So where it's possible, some people tried the lower one because they had difficulty climbing. If somebody was younger, they used to go on the top because there is warmer a little.

There was no heating except in the evening they used to-- they had some kind of a small stove made of clay. And some people used to dry their shoes and so on. And there I worked almost a year.

There was many other things because I was maybe in about 12 places during my 10 years of confinement. In the beginning, I was on general labor, till 1947, which meant that I used to do any type of work on construction and digging foundations. They used to take us in agriculture, to harvest, if they needed people, this type of work.

What was your life like in these camps?

Camps was very-- my life-- I'll tell you what my thoughts were. My thoughts were all the time concentrated on bread-- if I could get a piece of bread, to steal it, to grab it or so without abusing anybody. I didn't abuse anybody, but [INAUDIBLE] I used to do it.

But everything involved a certain danger. Because, let's say, if you see a tomato lying on the road where they lead you to work and you used to jump out to catch it, the guard could kick you with his boot. And this may be very dangerous. It may kill you or knock off your kidneys or something like this. So everything involved-- but only younger people could do it. And I was lucky. I was young enough at that time.

But it was a very hard life till '47. And why was it? Because all the better jobs in the camps were taken by the people who were arrested in '37. They had a special wave of arrests in '37. And in '47 most of these people went free. They were released, although most of them remained around the camps. But they were all the free employees. And then vacancies opened.

And because of my background, I was offered, in the beginning, as a tractor driver, which already improved my situation because I was free to go into the field. Although at the beginning, I was still-- even if I went to the field, there was two guards who used to guard us. Even the field was very large.

And then, a year later, I was appointed like a technician for plant protection, which they considered is something related to my field. It was a little related because we had some plant protection at school. And I worked on this job-- with the plant protection I worked almost till I was released in 1952.

Now, the war ended in, what, '45?

'45, yes.

How did that affect you?

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

Then also came the problem of Polish ex-residence. They said, oh, they'll let them go because they had some agreement, the Polish government and the Russian government. And indeed, they started to release some people, but mainly people who were involved in-- like thieves or criminals, embezzlers, but not politicals.

And in Russia, you know I was deep in Central Asia. They say that most of the people in my category, in European Russia we are released from the camps and went to Poland. But not me, because till it came to us, they already changed the situation and changed the rules. So I stayed there for full, to the end, exactly 10 years to the day, even a day later because they didn't have a guard to take me back to the station to release me.

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But I had another problem. You see, it was 10 years and five years in exile. And I came to the station, and they had to give me my passport because I was all the years without a passport. There I got a passport with limitations. I couldn't live in-- I think it was 39 major cities in the Soviet Union, which is stamped in the passport. And anybody would ask me for your passport. There, each policeman, each MGB man, can ask me, and he knows immediately my background.

And so I took their passport. And I made a selection. They gave me a selection deeper in Siberia because they offered me something in the Urals. But I knew the farther west I'll go, the harder it'll be for me. I'll have more discrimination as a ex-prisoner. So I decided to go where most of the people are ex-prisoners.

And I went to close to Yakutsk, called a city Angarsk, which was a new city built by prisoners. And they started to build there some industry which auxiliary to the atomic energy. When I went there and I settled there, I had difficulties at the beginning. But I settled there.

I had to come to the commandant and tell him that I'm here. And he used to watch me what I'm doing. And each time I wanted to travel-- let's say I had two weeks vacation-- I had to come and tell him that I'm leaving on vacation. He used to give me some paper who told this is if they would stop me somewhere else, they would arrest me again. And I tried to avoid it. And this way, I spent almost till 1957.

But the main problem was, in '53, Stalin died, which turned out for me the happiest day in my life in Russia because I knew things will change. What happened during Stalin's time, even though I felt I'm innocent, at the beginning I wrote and asked for revision of my case because I didn't have a trial. And in about several months, three or four months, I got a reply that your case was reviewed and left without change.

And then people told me, you are crazy you are writing this because you are lucky now, with the first time, because most of the people who asked for revision of the case, their sentence is increased. What happened, for example, if somebody from the 10 years you was there already two and a half years and you ask for this kind of revision, they added two and a half years back to you, and you have a new 10 years.

And then, after this, I didn't apply at all. And this is the reason Stalin's death was a tremendous spiritual satisfaction. And I knew that now I can do what I plan to do. Things will change. It couldn't be the same.

And immediately after, I applied for a revision of my case. It took them a long time. But, at the end of '56, I was exonerated, which means they gave me a document that I was arrested without any reason and so and so. No apology. But that's what they gave me. And with this, I could go.

They called me to the police station, and they changed my passport. They removed the 39 paragraphs that they had there. So now I had a clean passport.

And being in exile, as long as I had the 39, I couldn't work in my field. Because in the camps I worked, but outside I couldn't work. I worked as a steward, loading machinery and equipment that they brought from East Germany there. And they tried to install it in this area in factories.

But they had a rule that if somebody has a political paragraph, they couldn't trust them in the food industry. You may poison somebody or what. They didn't give any reason. Anyway, this was the rule. So till the time I was exonerated I couldn't work in my field.

The problem is in the camps when I worked as a plant protection technician, they used to trust me. We had locusts in Central Asia a lot. In the beginning, I had arsenic in powder and liquid form we used because we had to combat the locusts not to cause the least damage possible by the locusts. Then we had DDT or so.

And everything was in my possession. I was living in a small underground house. And one section was where I lived, and the other section I had all the minerals and poisons. So this is OK there. But outside, I couldn't work till I was exonerated.

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And after exoneration, I moved over to Karaganda, the place where I spent originally in the camps. And there, they sent me-- the Central Committee of the party. I went to the Central Committee, and they referred me to a-- this was a freezer. They used to freeze butter, all kinds of products. They gave me a job, according to them, to my background. They had some canning of fish, meat. They didn't have any vegetables. But this was the job that I got before I left.

I stayed on the job maybe six or seven months. But, at the same time, I applied for permission to leave Russia. And they had an agreement, the Polish government, with them. The Russian government said anybody who was born on the territory of Poland had the right to repatriate. But I couldn't do it before because I was imprisoned, and I didn't have full civil rights. This is a very strange arrangement. But the moment I got the clean passport, I was eligible. And I submitted this. And it took a while till I got the permission. And at the end of 1959, I moved out from Russia to Warsaw.

And then what happened?

Then I stayed in Warsaw almost a year. They gave me a job in Warsaw. In Warsaw, I was free to do everything, to talk everything. I could sell everything and buy. I brought certain things from Russia, minor things. But I sold it in Warsaw officially. And this improved my income. I was in a good job, but the income was very low.

Why did you decide to leave Warsaw?

One thing let me say is that when I went from Russia to Poland under one condition-- that I'll be able to leave Poland because it was in my mind. I didn't put a condition to anybody. But I dreamed about it, that I'll be able to leave because my life in Poland, in Warsaw, was, I would say, terrible to compare with these conditions here or so.

And secondly, I felt that the Poles-- communism is very artificial. Their communism relies and rests only on the Russian power. So I thought if I go to Poland and I fail to leave Poland, I'll go back to Russia.

And then what happened?

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

When I traveled to Israel-- it was in '71, the first time I traveled to Israel-- I came to look for some friends. I tried maybe to find some information about my wife. And I went to Yad Vashem. And they had an office for [NON-ENGLISH]. I went there and gave them several names. And they asked me my name, something. OK.

They found some information with the same name like my wife, but it turned out later that it was a different lady from another town in Poland. I visited the person to be sure that it's not it.

But then they pulled out the reason you are dead-- because somebody from my family-- see, when Yad Vashem opened, when they submitted all the names that they thought are dead in the family, my name was included. So they gave me the document for a souvenir. This was it.

And from Poland, I simply found relatives in-- the first day in Poland, I was in contact with almost everybody I knew from the family. One thing, I didn't have any notebooks or so. You couldn't. You weren't allowed to use, but I had a good memory at that time. And I remembered the addresses of most of the people because when my parents used to write, they were not very fluent in Polish, mainly in Yiddish and Russian. So I used to write the addresses.

My mother was a tremendous correspondent. Used to write letters, five, six pages [INAUDIBLE] one to everybody she had contact with the entire family. And I remembered all the addresses, and I started to write to them. For sure, most of the people perished, but some of them in Israel survived. And they gave me the addresses of all the other people. And maybe in two or three weeks, I was in contact with everybody.

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And what made you decide to come to America?

It was my dream at that time that I didn't stay in Poland. Two years ago that time I was already close to 50. I didn't think is any good reason to start a life there. And so I decided, if I can go to America, I would go to Argentina, where I had some relatives. I wrote to them. They said the time is not good and so anti-Semitic.

And then finally-- I have a cousin in Paris. And he found out that I'm alive. And he was in the camps in Russia, too, but it was a shorter period of time. It was Lithuania. And he sent a ticket for me to come to visit him. So I went to Paris.

And being there, I called-- I have a colleague of mine from the university who survived, too, and he is in New York. And he's a great man now. So I contacted him. And he advised me, come to America. But I didn't have any visa, so he sent me money for the trip-- for a round trip, because I couldn't go otherwise. And he said, you'll see. Maybe you'll stay here.

And indeed, on his instigation and encouragement, I went, in Paris, to the American embassy and to the Polish embassy. And they permitted me to go. And in this way, I came to America. I looked around for about two or three months. Without knowing your language, it was a little difficult. But in about three months I started work.

Where?

My first job was in Chicago.

Doing what?

I got in my field because in Chicago I didn't know all the arrangements. But I simply tried at the beginning to the Jewish Community Center in Chicago. And it was terrible because, in my case, in order to work, I had to have a statement from an employer to the immigration office. Let me stay. And I went to several Jewish employers, including Sara Lee. But when I came to the problem to file with the immigration office, they refused to accept me.

When I saw I wouldn't succeed with them, somebody advised me to go to the Chemical Society in Chicago. And the Chemical Society, they gave me a list of jobs available in the city. I didn't have transportation at home.

I started to work every day till I found somebody who was Irish. And I had problems communicating with him, but I learned only to write English during this time. So what he couldn't understand what I say, then I used to write it out.

And I don't know what happened, but he decided to hire me. And he wrote a tremendous letter to the immigration office. And in about a month, a month and a half, I went to the specialist quarter and got the right to be a resident.

Did you stay there for a long time?

I stayed a year, a year and several months. And then I saw that-- it was a bakery supplier, and I didn't see any future there. See, I would be glad if this would happen to me in Russia. But now I saw an open world, and I decided to look further.

And I contacted several universities. Then I submitted my papers to Berkeley, in Nutritional Science. But I didn't have any idea that I'll be admitted. And then finally, one day I got a telegram to come. They admitted me to a PhD program in Nutritional Science department.

And I traveled immediately. I went to my boss. I told him the story. And he was a nice guy in this respect. He said, under these circumstances, for sure. I don't have the right to stop you. And he let me go.

And I came to Berkeley. And there, I started my program. It was a PhD program in Nutritional Science. But what happened? I was already close to 50. And all the others were youngsters-- 25, 26. At the beginning, I had a advantage

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because I had a tremendous practice. But when it came to new things, particularly in physical chemistry and biochemistry, I saw that I am failing.

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

And I started '62 in Berkeley. In '63, I got a degree in my master's in Berkeley, in Nutritional Science. But this was on the way to the PhD. And I continued my PhD program in '64.

In May, I suffered a severe heart attack. This was a tremendous setback to me because the doctor and I felt I cannot continue like this. It's too much strain for me.

And one thing that Berkeley did, which happened in May, but I had my assistantship. I was a research assistant till October, till the new year started.

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

And somebody advised me. He's a friend of mine. His wife is librarian. They advised me, go to library school. And I went. I switched my papers from nutritional science to the library school in Berkeley. And I got my master's in Library Science in Berkeley.

And there, it took almost a normal time because library school is not hard to study, even with my handicap. And I got my degree a year and a quarter, which was normal. And the jobs at that time used to wait for you. So I immediately got a job with the State College in Cleveland.

And you've been there for--

22 years.

Incredible.

But during this time I did some work, first of all, in sciences. I was the science librarian there. But also, I published a two-volume Russian slang dictionary based on the camps, which came out in '72, and then, in '78, the second one.

In what language?

Oh, this is Russian English. No, it is Russian/English bilingual.

Is there a copy of it here?

I don't think so.

Oh, you should ask Joel to-- there should be a copy here. He should buy a copy.

Oh, OK.

Yeah. While you were in the camps and after the war, was there anything that kept you going? What kept you going?

You see, I left Poland-- it was a semi-democratic country. It got worse in the '30s, as I mentioned. But I had the vision of this life, of a free life in Poland. And I had to compare it in Russia. Also, I couldn't complain about discrimination.

But there, you could do anything, you see, Jewish people and so on. There was no limitation. You wanted, you go and

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be a pious man, go to a synagogue or so. There was no limitation, where in Russia, I would say, except twice on Yom Kippur, I didn't go to any synagogue.

There was a synagogue in Yakutsk, which was an old synagogue. But they took away the lower-- the main floor they took away as a dormitory for students. And the upper floor they made for men and women together. But I had to travel about 30 miles, which was-- I didn't have a car to go there. So this is the reason I went not too often.

But at Yom Kippur I used to go because, basically, they considered that the people in Bialystok perished in the fall of '43, which was close to Yom Kippur. In Yom Kippur, they have a memorial service. So I used to go there for the memorial service in Yakutsk. My town was about 30, 35 miles north of Yakutsk.

How do you feel that your experience has changed the way you live or changed the way you see life?

This is for sure. It changed a lot because I felt I'm less greedy in money because I saw that money wasn't any good at all because in the camps, some people sold there-- if they had something, good clothing or so, they used to sell it for 400 gram of bread. So how futile it is, yes. It is.

And in your life now, what does Israel mean to you? Do you have any feelings towards Israel?

I have feelings, yes, which is positive. I have a lot of friends there. And when I came in '71, they offered me a job, even there, in my field. But I felt I couldn't contribute too much to Israel. With my health and after the heart attack, it would be only a burden. And I didn't feel I should do it.

And what about your religious beliefs? After all that you've been through, how do you feel about Judaism? How do you feel about God?

You see, I feel there is somebody who watches us or leads the world and manages the world. And I'm very familiar with all the religious books and so, including Gemara and the Mishnah that I studied as a child. But I'm not the religious man that observes everything.

I think that's all the questions I have. Meyer, is there anything that you would like to say to people?

It's very unfortunate that our generation had to be in the place and the time when this all happened because this was almost unavoidable, the problems and the discrimination and the extermination that occurred in Central Europe. And simply, I think the basic thing, we should be careful and watchful so it won't happen again. And I think exposing everything and documenting all these facts and cases may convince people about the reality of all these occurrences. It is not a fiction that some people try to make it, but it was real.

Well, Meyer, thank you.

You're welcome.

Thank you very much. This interview will be a great contribution, really.

Thank you. I'm working now on-- this is what I mentioned about the film. I'm trying to make a film about life in Bialystok between the wars. I'm working with a television department in the college. Of course, I'm now emeritus, but I still have the rights to use their facilities.

The college at Hayward?

Yeah, this is California State University at Hayward, yes.

Have you talked to the Jewish Film Festival in San Francisco?

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I saw some of the films.

Call the office and talk to the people who run the festival. They may know of different films.

Yeah, OK. Sure, I'll talk to them. Also, I have the film that the librarian mentioned.

Image Before My Eyes.

This I have. I got it in Los Angeles. I took it on interlibrary loan.

Actually, you probably have a good-- there's also upstairs here, there's an Audio/Visual department. They may have some catalogs of films.

OK, I'll check. I'll see. If I'll take it, maybe I'll give it to our library and they may acquire something. I don't know. No, I contributed a lot of books that they bought for me, Russian books which I requested in my work and a lot of Jewish books. Actually, it's in our library.

Good. Here, let me put that away. Would you like a hot cup?

No. No, this is enough. Thank you.

Shall I set the camera down here?

Yeah.

Oh, yes. Oh, no. I thought the camera is already shot.

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