I've been training Michael on doing the camera. And so I'm going to be here for the first 10 minutes of the interview. And then we'll, as quietly as we can, just switch. And it's informal.

You can stop any time you need to or want to.

OK, OK.

And if you need to, just signal, and we'll stop, OK? You know you won't, huh? July 9, 1997, we're at the Holocaust Oral History Project at 400 Bryant Street in San Francisco, California. Today we are interviewing Jacob Gilat. My name is Peter Ryan, interviewer. Maurice Harris is going to be doing the video.

Along with Michael Mark.

OK.

Can we begin by you telling us where and when you were born?

I was born in Warsaw, Poland, capital of Poland, in October in 1933, 7 of October, to be exact. My family was quite prominent in Warsaw. My grandfather was one of the biggest building contractors in Warsaw, quite a wealthy man, and quite prominent in Jewish and even non-Jewish affairs in Warsaw.

He loved the city to his very last day. It was his city. He knew it. He knew almost every single building there. And among other things, he served as a member of the Warsaw City Council, elected on a with a [INAUDIBLE] slate.

He had six children who lived to adult age, survived to adult age. My father was his first born. And I was his first grandson.

How many of your immediate family?

My immediate? Well, let's put it this way-- if you count Grandfather and his children as immediate family, then let's say half of them-- the women perished in the Holocaust. The men, including my grandfather, were saved. Some managed to reach Palestine or Israel during the war. Others ended up, through Japan, in New Zealand.

In your immediate family, with your father and mother, how many were there, how many children?

Well, there were three of us. My mother died. I was born in '33. My brother was born, second brother was born in '35. Then the third brother, youngest brother, David, was born in '38. And my mother died in March '38, essentially as a complication of a childbirth infection.

So when the war started in September of '39, there were three of us and my father. And six days into the war-- of course, we had nannies and so on, because my mother wasn't there any longer.

Six days into the war, my grandfather decided that they should save themselves by escaping. Germans were a civilized people. That was the common belief. And therefore, the Germans will not hurt women and children. They'll take the men, put them in labor camps, which are quite hard.

And since Hitler-- who was Hitler? Just a little upstart. And once England and friends of big powers came into the war, he won't last more than a few months. So just to be on the safe side, Grandfather took his male sons. And--

Including your father?

--they ran, including my father. And we are left-- the three of us were left in Warsaw in the care of the women of the family, namely Grandmother and two aunts, to one of them, my father's older sister-- I mean, she was the second in line

of my grandfather's six children-- was the one that really took care of us and was instrumental in my and my brother's survival. She, unfortunately, perished in Auschwitz.

Now, what kind of living arrangements did you have that you can remember from your earliest childhood?

Well, I was the son of a very wealthy family. That means that we lived-- my father and we-- or my mother, and father, and the three of us, plus there was always a nanny around of some kind and other hired help.

We lived in a big, spacious four or five bedroom apartment in a good residential neighborhood of Warsaw. I know the address we were. Initially, it was Chmielna Street 57 or 59. That were my earliest years.

Then toward some years later, I was about maybe three years old or something like that, maybe four, we moved to an even bigger apartment on 43A Sienna Street. This house is still there. And the apartment is now subdivided into three or four, but it's still there.

Was this a Jewish neighborhood, a mixed neighborhood? Do you remember?

I think it was a mixed neighborhood. It was not a typically Jewish environment of Warsaw. I know definitely it was the geography. But it was not really the typically Jewish. We've moved out into essentially a mixed neighborhood.

Do you remember your early schooling?

Well, there wasn't much of it.

Did you start school before the war?

Well, I went to some sort of a nursery school. I still have, actually, two photographs taken two different years from that nursery school that were saved by my father.

Also, I remember that, before the war, was about five years old, I already could read and probably write, too. I know I could read. I was always very, very curious. And therefore, the best way to satisfy my curiosity was to teach me how to read and let me find out for myself. Excuse me.

Was it a religious family, Jacob?

Yes, very definitely, very definitely. So we are coming from a lot-- were many rabbis in the lineage somewhere. My grandfather was a businessman. But he was deeply involved in the religious community, was a Hasidic family.

And well, my father was essentially a primarily Jewish traditional Jewish education-- cheder and so on. And we were an Orthodox family. The family was Orthodox, very Orthodox, and quite well-known for it, and so on.

When my mother died, my father went daily, three times a day, to the synagogue to say Kaddish. And he took me along many times. Some of my earliest childhood memories are the little vignettes of, let's say, synagogue.

There are some others, but little vignettes of my father going to the synagogue and some of the people-- there was one bearded, bushy beard, red bushy beard, and so on, very intense in his prayers, and he scared me always. That's some of the early vignettes that I remember from those very early childhood days.

What other kind of vignettes do you remember?

Oh, let's say, very few scenes with my mother, like sitting at some table and so on, I mean, my father and I talking about something, my mother coming in, dressed in a long robe or housecoat of some kind, blue with little flowers, and the serving me an orange.

Years later, I tried to ask my father if was any significance this particular scene, which so deeply imprinted in my memory. He didn't even remember. He didn't know what I was talking about.

Others, like my grandfather was, like I said, a contractor, a big builder. And my father, well, he had a sort of small function in the business. At one point, walking down one of the Warsaw streets, and my father stood in front of a building and looked at it for what I felt was a very long time.

And I asked him, what are you looking at this stupid building for? He said, well, it's my building. I am building it. We are building it, and so your hands dirty, and so on. Come on, let's go.

So we ended up, to appease me for this long wait, where he was just gazing at this building going up, both with ice cream or something like that and so on. So these are the type of little vignettes. There are about four or five of these, or maybe a dozen.

What language was spoken in the house?

Polish. My grandfather was primarily a Yiddish speaker. Of course, he spoke Polish because he was a businessman. And he spoke Polish with officialdom, and with his colleagues, and with his foremen, and so on. But his prime language was Yiddish. So was my father's.

Yiddish?

Yiddish. But my mother came from-- she came from KrakÃ³w. And her family, she was raised in Polish. And her language was Polish. And she taught me Polish. I couldn't speak a word of Yiddish.

I learned Yiddish, to understand Yiddish, later, when I was in the ghetto. I wanted to find out what was going on. And all the grownups were speaking Yiddish. So by just listening to them, I taught myself to understand Yiddish. But my language was always Polish.

Polish?

Yes.

So to that degree, you were an assimilated family?

Not really. Well, we were Jewish. Let's put it this way-- first of all, we are not Zionists. But A, it was an Orthodox family. The culture in the home was Jewish, although in a way, the family was prominent in Warsaw.

For instance, my aunt was considered a very eligible Jewish young woman and very much into the Warsaw high society, not necessarily Jewish. But let's say, Sabbath, and kashrut, and so on was strictly observed.

My father was actually the more Orthodox. He was probably more a deeper believer and more of a Jewish scholar than my grandfather. My grandfather was into business from the age of 14 or 15. He took over from his own father and built up the business.

My father was more of a scholar. He had a fairly extensive Jewish traditional education. Plus, he also made it a point to speak Modern Hebrew. So he had a teacher. And he spoke fluent Hebrew in what's now the Israeli sort of Sephardi accent and not in the Ashkenazi accent common among Jews in Poland.

He also had some general education. His younger brothers were-- two studied law. One was an engineer. The women-- well, one was just mainly prominent in society. The other one studied chemistry. And there were two aunts.

That was quite unusual in those days?

Probably, let's put it this way. I have to think about these things in retrospect. I think was fairly common in this type of Jewish families. Grandfather was not a fanatic. And since he was in this business of construction and so on, and he loved the city, he was modern enough. And he did not object to giving his children education.

I think my father definitely went to cheder. The uncles may have started in a cheder, but they went to regular schools. My father never went to high school. My uncles did. And I don't think they were necessarily Jewish high schools.

But Polish high schools?

Yes.

The aunt that you spoke of who was eligible--

Well, she was, yes.

--yes, would she have, or any of the people in the family, would they have ever considered marrying outside Judaism?

Definitely not.

Definitely not.

By no means and so on. Let's put it this way. For my father, now, if one of my children or my brother's children were to marry a non-Jew, for my father, would be a disaster.

Probably today, he is-- well, he's suffering. He's 89 years old. And he is suffering from dementia. And so on, so he probably, wouldn't grasp it now. But any kind of that would have been a major disaster. In this sense, we have very, very far from assimilation.

There was no-- we were not Zionist. I always jokingly said, well, my grandfather, with all his wealth, why couldn't he have bought some land in Palestine, in Israel? He gave money very generously to Jewish causes and so on, but never to Zionism. He was an anti-Zionist. He believed his future is in Poland.

And my father sort of toyed, probably, with idea of immigration to Israel. He spent an extended honeymoon in Israel, like six months or so after he got married. But my grandfather would have none of it. And he was totally dominated by Grandfather. My grandfather was one of these type, domineering tycoons in many ways.

Do you know how long your family on your father's side had been in Poland?

Oh, many, many generations-- many hundreds of years. My father could recite the genealogy for about 300 years back or so. There were some prominent rabbis and people prominent through the history of Warsaw.

My grandfather, by the way, is mentioned in books published about Jews of Warsaw, and history of Jewish Warsaw, and so on. Well, the name was not Gilat, by the way. Gilat is a Hebrew name that I adopted or assumed as a teenager in '54. The name was Gutgeld, which really means in Yiddish good money.

Good money?

Yes. Gut is good. And geld is money.

Gutgeld?

Yes. That was the family name. One of my uncles, who was a New Zealander in his later years, he actually changed the spelling to G-O-O-D-G-E-L-D, rather than the normal spelling of G-U-T-G-E-L-D, just to make it easier to pronounce on his fellow New Zealanders.

Was the G-U-T spelling, was that German?

Well, like all the Jewish names in Poland, because of the Yiddish and so on, they had a German sounding or a German etymology. So it was-- of course, it was German.

How about on your mother's side, do you know how long they were in Poland?

Also for quite many generations. From a different occasion, I helped a cousin of mine to compile a sort of genealogy recently on my mother's side. And at least we can go back to the early 19th century and so on. So they have been around for years. And also, that was a rather prominent family in KrakÃ³w. Not by the wealth, but they were known, they were a prominent Jewish family in KrakÃ³w.

What kind of work did the father do, her father?

Well, he had a store, I think, of building materials-- iron or something like that.

And your mother, age-wise, in her family and the siblings?

Yeah. She was number two among her siblings. She had an older sister. And the younger brother, they were told, well, at least the ones that reached adult age-- I don't know how many of them died as little children.

But they had, actually, recently, through this family tree research that my cousin and I were doing in recent years-- he went to Poland, to KrakÃ³w, and so on-- he actually uncovered some very interesting documents, such as from the KrakÃ³w ghetto concerning their business was taken over by Germans.

And a German manager of the business was writing to some Nazi authorities asking to extend this permit to remain in KrakÃ³w, not to be deported, because he is instrumental in helping this German to run the business. And it's signed-- it's Heil Hitler and so on.

Now, who wrote that?

Oh, some German who took over the business was running it. And he was trying to help my grandfather stay in Warsaw and not to be deported to a concentration camp. And eventually, it didn't help. So on my mother's family's side, apart from the ones who immigrated-- her family was more Zionist in outlook and so on.

So some of my mother's cousins actually moved to Israel in the '20s or '30s. They survived. Most of the rest-- and the few that escaped-- but most of the rest perished in the Holocaust on my mother's side.

Is it fair to say that the Zionists in Poland were more political?

In what sense?

That they had a political sense about organizing and trying to train for immigration.

I say in retrospect that all I know is something that I know which I acquired in later years. Being a four or five-year-old, you don't know anything about Zionism unless you are a Zionistically active, member of a Zionist active family.

But the Zionist movement was a political movement. Of course they trained, and so on, and prepared for the-- and lobbied for a Jewish state, and so on. And it was a political movement by definition in Poland or anywhere else.

Of course, there is this kind of humorous definition of Zionism-- Zionist is as a Jew who collects money from another Jew to send a third Jew to Israel with.

OK?

Yeah.

When we asked about assimilation and so on, there are branches in the family. For instance, one of my grandfather's sisters, she was married to a prominent socialist, or communist, or Trotskyist, or whatever. He was a journalist. And she was not Orthodox. She was one of the members of the family more assimilated than almost anybody else.

She survived, by the way, because her husband managed to take her out to Switzerland. And she survived the war in Switzerland, ended up in England, and lived there to quite an old age.

There was a Zionist branch or there were some Zionists in the family. One distant cousin of my grandfather's-- not from Warsaw, but from the neighboring towns-- immigrated to Israel in the '20s as a pioneer, lived on a kibbutz, and was a member of the Israeli first cabinet.

He was one of the-- was he one of the signers of the declaration of independence? I think he was. So there were-- well, it was a typical large, well-developed, well-established Jewish family in Poland.

Do you know how your parents met?

I assume and presume it was in the usual typical sense, what's called in Yiddish, a shidduch, or in Hebrew, a shidduch, which is just a matchmaker that put them together and so on. And because they were two different towns, and I think that's how they met. But that's what I presume.

Any idea how far KrakÃ³w is from Warsaw?

Well, it's about four hours by train or so. We took the ride some years ago. We visited Poland, my wife and I. So it's a few hundred miles.

So that was quite an arrangement?

Yeah. That was an arrangement. I don't really know how they put together and so on.

Do you remember the beginning of the war? Do you have memories of that?

Of course. Well, I really remember the-- first of all, we spent during the summer, my brothers and I, with our nanny, were at some sort of a summer place out of town. And that's a typical-- was well, I don't know, 20-30 miles, maybe, away from the city. And we were just coming back.

This is the summer of '39?

That was summer of '39, yes. Also, my aunt, the same aunt I mentioned before, Anka, this society woman, got married on August 24, 1939, just a week before the war.

By then, we are back in Warsaw. And the wedding was a big, three-night affair. I mean, there were festivities or wedding festivities going on for three consecutive nights at my grandfather's big house. And then we went back.

How did you get back, by train, car, what?

I don't remember, probably went by car. All I remember is-- well, probably, my grandfather's chauffeur, who feature later in the story. My grandfather had a big, black Buick limousine. That was with a chauffeur.

And probably, he sent the chauffeur with the limousine to bring us back. And I remember vaguely the departure of my father, you know, tears in his eyes, and saying that he's leaving us now in the good care of our aunt and our nanny, but

he'll be back shortly.

This is six days after the war started.

That was on September 6, yes. I didn't quite understand what war meant and so on. But the days, very few days after they had left, the bombings of Warsaw started. And we had to go to shelters and so on.

So I still remember those getting up in the middle of the night, and going down to a shelter, and so on, and even this misunderstanding that's why night was for sleeping. And then I would get sleepy. I would not get sleepy. And we'd be wide awake at 2:00 AM, or not wide awake at 2:00 AM, and so on, and these wanderings. And of course, people are afraid of gas-- of use of--

Poison gas?

--of poison gas and the wake of the German use of poison gas in World War I. And there were no gas masks. So we had a little of a mask made of cheesecloth or something like that. And usually they were called tampons. We used to carry them around, and forget them in the middle of the night running down to the cellar, and so on.

And my mother's sister, the one I mentioned before, and her two kids were caught up with us. They were visiting, evidently. They came for a visit to Warsaw. And they were with us during that one month till the Germans took over Warsaw. So I definitely remember those first experiences of air raids, and war, and so on.

Also, our apartment was not damaged during the war. But my grandfather is-- well, he occupied one floor with something like, I don't know, maybe 12, or 15, or 18 rooms or whatever of a two-story house in a another mixed-- well, a little more Jewish, but mixed neighborhood of Warsaw.

And that house, including his big wine cellar, and so on, burned down, because they were hit by an incendiary bomb during this month. So I do remember. Again, these are not very detailed memories and so on. I still remember walking, going out afterward to see if there was anything can be recovered from my grandfather's house. And it was burned down completely.

Do you remember the air raids themselves?

Well, the noise-- the noise, and the running down in the middle of the night, being woken up in the middle of the night, and get dressed, or maybe sleeping in my clothes, and then running down to the cellar, and so on.

My cousins, the ones from KrakÃ³w, were with us. They were a little older. The girl, Ellie, was a teenager. And I think the boy was maybe 10 or 11. They even wrote a little song about these sort of occurrences and so on. I think I can still remember a verse here or half a verse there and things like that. I probably remembered a little bit more when I was younger.

And it was about the air raids?

Yes, waking up in the night, going all around, and checking who is there, and so on, because there were three of us-- David, who was only a year and a half old, was born in March '38. So there were a total of five kids, two or three nannies, one grandmother, two aunts-- there were three aunts, there was the one from KrakÃ³w, my mother's sister, and two of my father's sisters. So there was a big entourage all trying to run down into the cellar.

Do you remember how you felt when your father told you that he was going away?

I don't think I understood it. I don't think I had any special feeling. Ok so he's going away. He had gone away before, he had gone after I was five years old, not quite six. I don't think I really understood what-- my understanding and grasp of the situation came probably a year or two later. I matured and grew up quite considerably a little bit later, like a year or two later.

Well, there is something they are unable to recover, I think they are lost. Just months later, my grandfather and his sons ended up, in October-- well, September or October '39 in the city of Vilnius, Vilna, which is today Lithuania. It is part of the dispute-- there always been a sort of dispute between Poland and Lithuania.

And the Lithuanians took over when the Germans invaded Poland. When the Polish state disintegrated, Lithuanians took it over. And they were there under this Polish city. But they were there under Lithuanian rule.

And for a while, mail was available. And I used to write letters to my father as-- so probably some months later, I already could write-- not only read, I could write. And I saw those letters. My father had them when I came to Israel years later, in the late '40s. And I saw them and admired them.

But he seems to have lost them, because well, I asked him several times as an adult to find those letters for me. And he couldn't find them. And then when he moved to a home, in a old man's home, it was about a year ago, 15 months ago, I did a very thorough search of his house and found any number of old papers and so on. But these letters weren't there.

They weren't there.

No. He must have lost them or misplaced them when he moved and so on. He must have lost them. And it's really a pity. I saw them briefly as a teenager. And I would really very much like to see them again. I was very much surprised at the quality of both the spelling, and the grammar, and my ability to express my feelings, and my literacy at the, let's say, the advanced age of six or maybe seven.

How did they make their way to Vilna?

Well, to Vilna, they walked out of Warsaw and then it's combination of trains, horse-driven carts, hiking, a mixture. I never-- they just gradually moved on. There may have been trains. There may have been some riding cars. They had money. They took whatever the-- what the cash there was around, plus some of the family jewelry, and so on, which they'd convert into currency.

So they managed to Vilna. Of course, Grandfather was well-known, had many acquaintances, knew a lot of people, and was very respected. So he could do whatever he pleased. So they stayed there.

And when it became evident that there was no way to return, that war is going on, by then, the Germans had already probably run over France. And I don't remember exactly now if it was Dunkirk, but Dunkirk was probably in late '40 or so. So by then, it was obvious that they wouldn't be able to come back. And they had to get out.

They started buying their way out of the German-occupied or the Russian-occupied parts of Eastern Europe. And they obtain-- well, first of all, my grandfather qualified for certificates to Palestine.

So he, my father, and two of my uncles obtained these certificates. And they bought Turkish visas to Istanbul and across the Mediterranean from there, somehow.

In, let's see, probably late 1940 or early '41, before the Germans invaded Russia in June, was June '41. Then two of my uncles, the one I mentioned, Maurice Goodgeld-- G-O-O-D-G-E-L-D-- and the man my aunt married-- they were married for all of four days of celebrations, because then he was called to join his reserve unit of the Polish Army.

He came from a more assimilated family in Eastern Poland. And he joined. And then later, he left his army unit and joined my grandfather and was with them. And they couldn't get the Turkish visas.

They bought the Japanese visas. Quite recently, the story of this Japanese consul who distributed visas to-- it was publicized over the last couple of years or so, because the man had died--

Sugihara.

--yes, exactly. So I think there's no one to ask, because my father just doesn't remember anymore. There's no one to ask. But I think they got their visas from him and moved to Japan, then to the Philippines, and ended up in New Zealand somewhere around '41 or so, anyway, before Pearl Harbor. Well, they lived in New Zealand for many years. And they visited Israel. So I met them both.

They stayed there, though, in Israel?

They stayed there, yes. One came to Israel. The uncle by marriage, he came to Israel after the war to find a wife and then visited a number of times later. Well, that's neither here nor there.

Yeah. So let's go back to the beginning of the war. And you say, in the next couple of years, you grew up a lot. And your memory gets clearer.

Yes. As I grow older, it gets clearer, because I'm getting a little more involved. OK. Shortly after the Germans occupied Poland, probably early '40 or so, they started forming the ghetto.

My street, the street we lived on, initially became part of the ghetto. Walls were erected around. But it became part of the ghetto. So we didn't have to move. After a while, my nanny disappeared. But my aunt made--

Polish?

I think so. Well, there were actually two of them. One was-- when I was born, the family hired a sort of a nurse to help my mother take care of a little baby. So she took care of me as a baby. And then I had nannies. And then my second brother, my mother took care of him herself.

But that nurse came back when my mother died to take care of David and my younger brother. So she was there. And she left first. And then my nanny was gone also. But generally, we still lived in the same apartment.

And my aunt did her utmost to shelter us, to shelter the three children, her brothers three children, from what was happening around her. We had toys. We had books. There was money available. So food was not scarce, certainly not in that period. The apartment was spacious.

Actually, in that period, I think we're still living there, with some attempts at organizing a Jewish life in the ghetto, and later, some books, and pictures, and so on. And much of it brings back memories of what the ghetto looked like in those days. I think there is in-- what's his name, the famous photographer whose book we had--

Vishniac.

Vishniac-- Roman, Roman Vishniac. He's a famous photographer who took pictures of the ghetto. And his book is published here. They had a big exhibit of his originals at the Magnes Museum 10, 12 years ago in Berkeley.

And there is a picture in his book of a woman, the streets of the Warsaw ghetto, a woman very elegantly dressed wearing a hat, an elegant hat, and so on leading two children, holding them by their hands. And around her, people were obviously hungry, disheveled, and so on.

And I look those pictures. I said, it's almost my aunt, and my brother, and I, because she was using the family money to preserve a semblance of normalcy and to shelter us from the horror, the hunger, the death, and so on. I should when we walked by. I mean, there are dead people, starving people, people dying of typhoid fever, and whatever in the streets.

Did you go out much? Or did she try to keep you in?

Well, no, we went out. And she was trying to lead as much of normal life as possible. So she did go out, at least, I'm speaking now of, let's say, '41 or so. I'm in '41 at this point now. And she was-- when everyone would walk by

something like that, she would just try to distract my attention, walk quickly, talk of something else so that I wouldn't see that.

Did you have a sense of what was happening?

Well, sure, of course. I was an alert, intelligent, growing up child. Then also in '41, I think, I attended school, third grade. There were schools formed in the ghetto, mostly in private apartments and so on. And for one year, I attended school. I could read, and write, and so on. But for one year, I attended school.

What was that like?

School. What was that? Well, put it this way-- what kind of comparisons do I have? I did not go to school before then. I was supposed to start first grade. But the war interfered. I skipped second grade just because. I don't know, really, why I went to third grade. I probably was supposed to be in second. But since I could read, and write, and was generally well-developed, so precocious probably, just put me in third grade.

So I had friends. And I had the usual. Was the first time, I think, that I was really in the company of children, except for maybe there was very early nursery school at times, of which, I remember nothing, except for those photographs that prove that I was there.

So this was my attempt at school. And about that time, probably late '41, life was kind of normal too there. We have a fair number of photographs from that period. My aunts were taking photographs of us, and themselves, and Grandma and sending them to my father.

And that's how these photographs survived, contrary to his letters, which he wouldn't give me, he gave me most of the photo collection that he had. So now, I have them-- not here in the States, they're back in my house in Israel.

And so it was normal, the summer. It was the summer of, I guess, '40 or maybe '41. Some was '40, some was '41, because you can see the progression. Especially you can tell from David's pictures.

When the war started in '40, he was only two years old. And then he's a little bit bigger. He's three years old. And so until mid '41, mail would still be sent to my father in Vilna. That's how these photographs survived.

So you can see the normalcy. We look well-fed. We had a summer. And there are pictures in the sun, in the courtyard. Warsaw, like most European cities, has these internal courtyards. Their houses have the internal courtyards. So a lot of pictures are taken there. So we may not have gone out the street that much. But we were free to roam around the courtyard.

Actually, let's put it this way, I didn't remember it, but when I came to Warsaw some years ago, there was a name of the street. I was trying to locate the streets of that period and so on. And there was a street called Sliska.

And the names sort of rang a memory. And I looked at it. And so there, I realized that Sliska is just a street one block away parallel to the street I lived on. I must have gone by, through the street, to school or wherever else I was going daily. And that's why it rang a memory. But it really took years to get it back.

Did you have to wear a star then?

Pardon? Well, no. First of all, in Warsaw, there were no stars. There was an armband with a blue Star of David. The emblem in Warsaw was not the regular yellow star with Jude on it. But in Warsaw, the regulation was an armband with a blue Star of David. And as a child of my age, under 10 or so, we did not have to wear it. The rest of the family, the grown-ups, of course did.

Then sometime in that period, probably late '41, mid '41, late '41, I don't really know, the Germans were gradually shrinking the area of the ghetto and forcing the Jews to move more and more into-- making it more crowded and so on.

And of course, at the same time, the population was also being decimated by the deportations. But that was something I was not quite aware of. Anyway, we have to leave that apartment and move to another one, which has been in the family's possession. It belong, I think, to one of my great uncles who were there. We had to move in and get into more and more crowded quarters.

You moved in with your great uncle?

We moved with my great uncle and a number of other people. I don't remember how many people were there in this apartment. I know I no longer had a room. I had a cot somewhere in the corner and so on. And that's where I learned-- I mentioned I had learned Yiddish.

That was the time where I learned Yiddish, because the adults were talking. And I wanted to know what was going on. So I had to listen on. But they were speaking Yiddish, partly so as I won't understand. My brother is still too young. My brother was still too young. But partly, because that's the language they used. My great uncles and so on, they spoke Yiddish, of course.

Does this grandmother that you mentioned, was that your father's mother?

Yes, it's my father's mother. And just to say OK, she didn't quite understand what's going on. I was saying that she doesn't know what's going on at all. And she doesn't know that.

At some point, she had a fight with my aunt, because my aunt for the first time-- I still remember it-- for the first time, she brought bacon, or ham, or something like that home, or something obviously non-kosher, because that's all she was able to buy, to obtain. And my grandmother recognized it. And they had a big fight.

And Grandmother said, well, I can't live with you any longer. You're bringing this [INAUDIBLE] into my house. I'm going to move to my sister's. And I thought to myself, stupid Grandma, doesn't she know that her sister's been deported already six months ago? And she's probably been burned by now-- gassed, and burned, and so on, cremated.

You thought that?

Pardon? Yes. At least, well, moving ahead a little bit, I mean, the dates-- I'm not going in exactly chronological order, but that must have been '42, where there were already massive deportations. And people knew what was going on.

Did you know?

Yes.

So you knew that there were deportations.

Yes. Well, of course, I knew there were deportation and daily quotas. And the deportation were to concentration camps. I think I already heard the name Treblinka mentioned or Majdanek. I mean, these names were around then.

Did you know what was happening there?

Yes, to the extent, of course, that an eight-year-old and nine-year-old can comprehend death. But at least I could verbalize it, that the people were taken and killed in those camps.

Well, back then, there was a daily quota. And the way to escape it, from the deportation-- the way to escape it was to hide till about noon. And they knew they picked up enough people to make the daily quota, then you could live more or less normally till the next day.

So everyone hid out during the--

Yes. Well, not everyone, at least we did.

Yeah.

We did.

Were you still going to school at that time?

No. I said I was in school for one year in '41. This is now-- I'm now in '42. I'm in summer and fall of '42. And of course, there were more and more of these sick and hungry people in the streets.

I remember walking down the steps of our house one day and seeing these two little children licking off-- someone had spilled some food, like soup or something like that, liquid food on the stairs. And these two little kids were lapping it like dogs. So these are the things I remember, of course. I was being less and less sheltered.

Less and less what?

My aunt stopped trying to shelter me and protect me from seeing what was going on. And also, since she was busy doing other things, and trying to feed the family, and grandma was completely out, so she couldn't supervise us.

And my other aunt, well, she was getting married and so on. She didn't want to get involved with her brother's children and so on. And so I was more or less on my own. I was running around. There was this electrician fellow that was fixing things and so on. So I became his assistant. I did all kinds of things.

What did you do for him?

Pardon?

What kind of work did you do for him?

I don't know, probably holding his tools, handing his tools, hanging his wires, and so on, observing what he was doing, actually looking for things to do.

Do you remember his name?

No, no way.

How long were you with him?

I don't know. It could be a month, could be four months, could be two weeks. I don't know. I haven't got the faintest idea. I just remember these little--

Grants.

--picture, little scenes.

Is that a good memory with this man?

Yes, yes. Let's put it this way-- I was free. I was on my own. I was independent. I was no longer under the probably I knew what was going on. I had no control. But at least I knew what was going on.

Were you worried about your brother?

I don't think so, at least it doesn't-- if I don't remember being worried, I probably wasn't. Let's put it this way. What I really remember is the efforts of my aunt to do as much as she could and Grandma's essentially nonsense.

Like I'll tell you another one. The one was started with a sister. And another one was-- there was this black bread was part of our daily fare. And it had an S, big letter S drawn on it. And S in Yiddish means eat. So she would say, here, here is an S Eat, eat, eat.

Said, what I said, well what, What a stupid woman. What is she concerned with? Of course, I'll eat my bread when I am hungry. OK. We're coming now to, let's say, October '42. The ghetto population was getting smaller, although if--

Did you have any run ins up to this time now with any of the Germans or the occupiers?

Let's see, you hardly ever saw Germans. The authority you saw-- and there were the helpers and so on-- there was the Jewish ghetto police. They did the German's bidding. They were under the Germans. We did not see Germans.

We could accept-- OK, we are coming to the part where I'm beginning. I knew they were there. I knew they're responsible for our plight and for what's happening. But that was about it. I don't think I ever saw them, at least not from a close distance.

Rounding up of quotas was the duty of the Jewish police. And they did it. They could be bribed, probably. But they did it because otherwise, if they did not bring up enough people to meet the daily deportation quota from the famous or infamous Umschlagplatz in Warsaw, they would be deported. They would be made part of transport.

So they made sure they got them.

They make sure they got the number of people. So what we had to do was we were hiding mostly in attics. And the routine would be--

Were there attics in your apartment?

No. Well, all these apartment houses in Warsaw had big cellars. And they had big attics. And we used to go into hiding in these places. October in Warsaw is already pretty cold. This is a cold country.

Of course, there was no heating. And those attics were quite chilly. And it was very difficult too. And all you had to do is to hide somewhere in the attic and keep quiet. Then I think I could hear German voices already, for the first time. I think I may have heard German voices.

Would they round people up in the apartments? Or would they catch them on the street?

Well, let's put it this way, I think they started on the streets. But people got wise and avoided the streets. So they would--

They would have to come into the houses.

--come into the houses, and so on, and to the attics. And at that point, they were very conscientious, very thorough, because there were plenty of people. They took it the easiest route, probably. But then my two brothers-- well, everybody had colds. They were coughing, and sneezing, and so on, and uncomfortable. And it was very difficult to keep them quiet.

And also, it was becoming obvious that with the daily deportations and so on, survival of the ghetto is getting to be totally impossible. And something had to be done. And Aunt Anka started going out, regularly out of the ghetto, to see, to talk, and meet Polish acquaintances, to see if she can get-- find someone on the so-called Aryan side.

Now, who was doing that?

Aunt Anka, my aunt. She was the one. The one who got married, at one point, her husband asked her to join her. It was early on. I'm just backtracking a little bit into the last half in 1940. And there was this river that separated the German and the Russian-occupied parts of Poland. And you could take a boat across the river during the night. There were people on a farm.

Was that the Bug river?

Probably. And it all went--

Now, he was on the Russian side?

He was on the Russian side. And she was on the Polish side. And she went there. And this one night, she couldn't cross. She had to wait for a day or two. And then she suddenly decided she was going back. She was not going to leave her mother and us alone, and join her husband, and be saved. So she decided, at some point-- had she been able to cross, she would have probably crossed, and lived an old age.

She felt the weight of responsibility for the people there?

I think so. I think so. At least that's-- well, she didn't confide in me. But that's what I grasp of the-- gleaned of the story when she suddenly came back. Part of it may be a retrospective reconstruction.

So she was trying to set up arrangements?

Well, she was trying to set up arrangements. I'll come back to this in a little while. And the first thing, the first order of business was to do something about the two little children, because I was already old enough, and disciplined enough, and understanding enough so I could control myself. They had to be taken out.

So she found some-- OK, she had a brother-in-law who came from Eastern Poland on false papers. And he was living outside the ghetto. Poles could smell a Jew from about a mile away because Poland was the most antisemitic country in Europe.

They had their reasons. The Jews held 50% or 60% of the-- they were 10% of the population. And they probably controlled 50% or 70% of the Polish resources and so on. But they were very antisemitic. And their favorite game to spot Jews and either blackmail them or hand them over to the Germans right away.

Would they get a reward?

Probably, or just out of spite. The reward could have been a bottle of vodka or something like that. And not everybody, not all Pole did it, but there were large enough numbers. And they could smell a Jew from-- well, this fellow's luck was that he was not a Warsaw Jew. So they couldn't quite smell him or say so.

How would they do it, on appearance, what?

Instincts, I don't know. We can usually tell Israelis from a distance. We can all tell compatriots. I don't know, gait, body language, accent, nose, color of eyes, color of hair, instincts. And let's put it this way, the Germans were totally unable to do it. Anybody who had any kind of any piece of paper would easily go by the Germans. You couldn't very well fool the Poles.

So he was also helping her because he lived in Warsaw. And he was her messenger. But she went out in Warsaw. It's very easy. The ghetto was fenced in and so on. But it was very, very easy to get in and out.

The problem was surviving outside-- having papers, having a place to sleep, avoiding the Poles. And of course, male Jews-- well, for male Jews, it was even harder because of the circumcision. Poles are usually non-circumcised. Jews are. And therefore, it was very easy to prove the man was Jewish.

My aunt had her handicap because she was well-known in Warsaw. So someone could have recognized her. But she did go out for a day or two at a time to try to find arrangements for the family. The first thing she found, they found someone to take my brothers separately. Or one night, they were just taken over the top of the wall.

Christian family took them, probably--

Yes.

--took them?

Yes. I don't know enough about them. I know that David, for instance, was with a woman who had had a grandchild who died. She came from a small village. And she went there for the summer-- no, that was later. She went there for the-- anyway, she took him in. And then she took him to her native village as her grandson.

Then I also started serious negotiation--

Do you remember them leaving your brothers?

Yes, of course. Well, I remember that I knew it was happening. I knew that they had to be saved. I also knew the general plan was, what she was trying to do, is find someone who would try and take in the entire family.

And she found the chauffeur of my grandfather. She contacted him. And he of course remembered my grandfather. He worked for him for years. And he was willing to take the family. And the idea was how do you save a family of six, or seven, or eight people, obviously Jewish? I mean, my grandmother, for instance, you don't need to be a Pole to realize she was Jewish-- from her accent, from her appearance, from everything.

And so she said, the idea was these Polish apartment houses had this-- each one had this supervisor concierge. And they have control of vacant apartments, and cellars, attics, and so on.

So the idea was to buy such a position in a big apartment house and use the various resources of this supervisor concierge to hide the family. That was the idea. They started negotiating with him, and talking about it with him, of course, getting money. And although she wouldn't confide in me, but since the quarter was so cramped, I could hear the talk for me.

At this time, were you getting pretty good in Yiddish?

I still can speak it decently to this very day. But of course, I could understand every word, no big problem.

Do you think your brothers understood what was happening to them?

I can't say anything about Shalom, because he died at the age of seven. So I don't really know. David probably understood. If you ask him, he'll tell you. He did. Some of it could be retrospect and so on. Some of the stuff, I may have told him over the years. He certainly knows it. And he tells the story almost the same as I do.

Just to go on, while she was, Anka was doing all these negotiations, and attempts, and so on, Stanley, [? Stasz, ?] the chauffeur, he was single, subletting a room in a friend's apartment.

And he was making his living just like his friend and many, many others by smuggling food from the villages into Warsaw. They would ride out on a train, go into a village, buy a couple dozen eggs, a few pounds of butter, and some produce, and bring it back on the train to Warsaw, and sell it on the gray or black market.

To?

To inhabitants of Warsaw. The Poles were not doing too well under German occupation. Food was scarce and so on. The Germans, just to prevent this, and just to keep the Poles under control, and so on, they would occasionally raid these trains.

And whoever they caught with this kind of contraband, they would execute them on the spot. And that's how Stanley [? Sokolski, ?] my grandfather's chauffeur, driver of the Buick, got himself killed a few days later. And that was, let's say, late '42 or January '43.

Was he still aiding the family?

He was not aiding the family. They were negotiating with him and so on this project of saving the family by-- he had confided in his friend and landlord while he was in his apartment where he was living.

And well, let me call him by his real name and not the name he went under. Bumek Abraham was my aunt's brother-in-law, the one who had lived under forged Polish papers in Warsaw, came for another round of negotiations or maybe to finalize the deal.

He went in and knocked on the door. A little girl opened the door. Let's see, that was from late '42. She was born in '34. So she was about eight years old then. And she opened the door. A strange man standing there and he wants to talk to Mr. [? Sokolski. ?]

And she said, Mr. [? Sokolski ?] is dead. I'll get my father. He wanted to run away. But he couldn't quite escape, because the father came out. The father is Aleks Roslan, the man whose picture I showed you. And you will put it on the camera a little later. I just bring it.

Anyway, and the daughter, the girl walked in the door, was Mary, my adopted half-sister. But he came out. And he right away-- since [? Sokolski ?] had confided in this friend, he realized what it was all about.

And he says, well, he said, well, if he's gone, if he's dead, I don't want to bother you. I'll just leave. He said, no, I guess that you are here on the matter of G, which is the initial of our name. And if that's so, I know about it. And I'm willing to take over. Well, he's dead, unfortunately. But I know his project. And I will take over.

Some days later, Anka went out to meet him. And that I remember. She came back. And she was talking-- not to me, of course, but to almost everybody who was there. Can I trust this complete stranger, this Goy who I have never met? Is he one of those Poles who will take our money and call in the Germans? Or is he to be trusted? Do I have another alternative?

We have run out of alternatives. My Polish friends will not-- are unable to do anything, unwilling to take the risks. He's the only person who I now have willing to take the risk. And they were talking of money and so on.

And usually, you would not expect people to do it just for-- to risk their lives, and the lives of their families, and so on without some sort of compensation. She was willing to-- well, at that time, cash was long gone. The jewelry was sold, whatever was left. The only thing that was there was real estate.

Was what?

Real estate. My grandfather owned big chunks of Warsaw real estate. Some of it doesn't exist anymore. There are now streets. But some of it is still there, like I don't know, 30-40 large lots, and houses, and so on worth millions of dollars then. And my grandfather's worth was several million dollars in 1939, let's say.

So she had power of attorney. And there were still people-- you can imagine-- but there were still people in the ghetto in those days, Jews in the ghetto who were willing to buy real estate. And she could.

She wanted to sell a piece of property. The price, of course, it would bring was much less, according to the black market

value and so on. And Aleks said, well, put it this way, I don't need this amount of money right now. If I survive, I trust that the family will compensate me, or remunerate me, and so on. If I don't survive, what am I going to do with the money?

And later, years later, he said, well, had he gotten the money, he would have become reckless. Being poor, he was careful. And because of that, that helped him survive. I'll come to him in a little while, because the man had an uncanny survival instinct. He was unbelievable.

13. And the family wanted to hear the story. And I've been telling it for about 50 years now with little more, a few more insights and some more understanding.

And there has been, some years ago, the ADL, the Anti-Defamation League, created a series of tape interviews with survivors and rescuers-- rescuers and survivors. And it was shown, I think, here on public TV in the state. That was 20 years ago. Ari Foreman--

Foreman?

--not Foreman, something like that. Anyway, he was the one who made it. And they interviewed me in Israel. And they interviewed Aleks Roslan in Florida. And they cut it. I couldn't believe it. Later, the stories merged so well that they cut it sort of as if we were having a dialogue sitting in the same room. It blended so well--

Yeah, wow.

--because it was authentic.

I'm going to ask you to try not to get that all the time in the chair. We could get another chair if you want.

You can take mine.

No, I'll do it.

OK.

OK.

Are you going to come back?

I don't know I'll come back again. I realize it's too hot.

OK.

OK.

You ready?

I talk. Ready?

Wait.

Here we go.

OK. So we were at the point where Anka was deliberating whether to trust Aleks or not. And we are now in the early '43, probably January, February, something like that. And at that point, the deportation had stopped.

And the Germans were saying that they are guaranteeing the life of the rest of the ghetto-- what was there were half a million people, I think, still left in the ghetto-- for at least till October. And that was something that they spread around, because they were beginning to at least know or have some intelligence about the preparations of the underground, and the uprising, and so on.

You remember, April '43 is the world-famous and important uprising of the Warsaw ghetto. The underground was forming, was active. The Germans must have known something about it. And because of that, they were sharing these promises.

Spring is also a time of Passover. And my Orthodox grandmother was saying that she doesn't want to spend the Passover among the Gentiles, and be forced to eat bread, and so on. She wants to stay in the ghetto.

And my aunt just said, all right. She had this deal with Aleks. She was not selling the big piece of property. She was just going to find some money to help him buy that position of the supervisor concierge in some apartment house.

But then she decided that at some point, probably, he was trying to convince her to start this operation and not to talk to-- and not to wait. He didn't trust the Germans. He did not believe the rumor. He may have heard otherwise from Polish underground.

Anyway, she decided that it's my turn next. I go. She is going to stay with her mother, and her sister, and sister's husband. I mean, my other aunt acquired a husband sometime in '42.

So how many people were you living with at that point?

I don't quite remember. Obviously, there was my aunt, the three of-- well, my younger brothers had gone by then. So there was my two aunts, her husband, Grandma. I think my great uncles were either separate or they were already gone then too. At least the deal did not include them.

There were my great-aunts. And for instance, one of my great-aunts had a baby just about then. And she had placed this baby with a Polish family. And from what I know, the baby had survived was alive in '45, '46.

But my grandfather insisted that she be found. There are other people who could help and locate her, and find her, said, no, leave her alone. She was placed with this Polish family as a tiny baby, less than six months old. She doesn't know she's Jewish. Why should she be told and confused? She's been adopted. She has her parents. And she may as well grow up as a Pole, and not as a Jew, and come to no harm.

And Grandfather didn't like the idea. But there was nothing he could do. So anyway, the deal involved just us, my four or five people. But it would include bringing my brothers back.

It would?

Yes. They were temporary there. Well, we'll come to them a little bit later in the story. So it was my turn now. The day was 19th of March, 1943. I was told a few days earlier that it's my turn. And I would be placed with this family. My aunt would come and visit me every once in a while. There was this relative, Bumek Abraham that would come and visit me. But I will have to stay with this family.

Coming out of the ghetto, like I said, there was no problem. I was big enough and old enough not to be taken over the wall in the middle of the night. There were people. Jews were working in German factories and so on that were located outside the ghetto walls.

And they would just walk out, loosely supervised by Jewish police and German guards in the morning, go to do their day's work, and come back. It was very, very easy to slip out of this group and move around.

The problem, like I said before, was surviving outside the ghetto. If you didn't have support, you didn't have a place to

live, you didn't have your papers, then your chance of surviving for more than a week were essentially zero.

You could. And people have done it. You could escape in this way, keep moving, and join the partisans in the woods somewhere. But that was not for, let's say, nine-year-olds.

Now, up to this time, in April of '43, had you been outside the ghetto?

No. I don't think I ever was outside the ghetto. I was in the ghetto. This was the first time I came out with my aunt, with this group of workers. As soon as we crossed the wall, we slipped off to the right or to our left, walked into a house or just a courtyard, in a little room off the courtyard.

And there was this man looking at me, smiling, wearing a long gray topcoat, tweed gray topcoat. And he looked at me, exchanged a few words with my aunt, sort of called me in, and embraced me.

He and my aunt exchanged a few words. And he said, time to go. And we left. He took me home. And home was a small apartment, I suppose two bedrooms and maybe even a living room that served as a bedroom.

It was him, his wife, his two children. Urik was about 2 and 1/2 years older than I, was about 12 then. And Mary was about a year younger than I am. And there was another boy there, his nephew, whose father was killed, taken away or killed by the Russians, I think.

I mean, the Poles had it from all sides-- not only the Jews, the Poles too. And he more or less adopted him. And I came into the family. And the deal was that as long as just the family is there, I'm one of the family.

Now, was he Jewish living under assumed papers?

Oh, no.

No?

He was a Pole. Aleks Roslan was-- well, time to give you a little of his biography. He was a Pole from Eastern Poland, born in-- well, he's about 88, then was born in the early years of the century in a small village in Eastern Poland. Were five or six children there in his family.

And they had a small piece of land. When he was a youngster, young teens, his father died. His mother remarried. And he lived on this farm. The man, his stepfather, all I hear was that there was a drunk and so on. And he was claiming that he is mismanaging and wasting his father's farm and property.

When he was about 16 years old, he realized-- he was working side by side in the field or in the yard, side by side with his stepfather. And he realized that he was actually physically stronger than his stepfather. He was 16 and a hefty, strong, healthy 16-year-old boy.

So a few days later, he just beat his stepfather up, kicked him out of the house, and told his mother, the bum goes. You can stay or go with him. And he started farming on his own. He needed-- the mother, I think, left. He needed a woman around the house.

The mother had left?

Pardon?

The mother?

The mother had left. And he was there. The brothers were-- some of them were there, some of them weren't. I don't remember the details. But he ran the farm. He needed a woman around the farm. You cannot farm in a small Polish farm

without a woman.

So he married a woman about two years older than he was. He was all of 17 by then or so when he married. And he was running the farm. Some years later, he decided that farming was not for him. It's hard to make a living, a lot of hard work. And so he wanted to-- he moved to the neighboring town and started about the only non-Jewish textile store in that whole region of Poland and did reasonably well.

As I said, he had an uncanny instinct of survival. He was uneducated, almost illiterate. He had three years of grammar school, grade school. That's his entire education. He can write Polish words-- well, poor grammar and very poor spelling. English is worse.

And he lives in the States now. He's lived here for the last-- since '47, that's 50 years. But he read the New York Times. But he can't spell. Mela, his wife, had even less school than he did. She was always illiterate in any language. Well, she could read a little. She could read. She was a great woman.

What was her name?

Mela, Mela Roslan. Her real name was Kristin Amelia-- A-M-E-L-I-A-- but well, everybody called her Mela. She died. She died almost exactly a year ago. Well, she was 88 or 89 when she died.

So he was running this store, had two children-- three, one died as a baby. He was also a member of the Polish National Democratic Party, which was the antisemitic party of Poland. He had to compete with Jews. Jews had the special textiles. Jews had not-- as I said before, 50% of the resources and business in Poland. In textiles, they had 95%.

So he said, they were bad. They should leave Poland. And so on. But he was-- well, the man wouldn't swat a fly. And that's why he decided to save a Jewish family.

Since he was afraid, he actually escaped that part where he came from, Bialystok. He was actually taken over by the Russians. But he decided he was going to run away from the Russians, because the Russians had arrested his brother and sent him away. So he escaped to Warsaw.

And he used whatever money he had to buy some textiles from the wholesale merchants who used to buy from. When we had the store, they were all Jews. And they had accumulated some of it. But then somehow, somebody called in the police that he was having illegal warehouses textiles.

And they confiscated it. Usually, the Polish police would do these things. And they would just, well, whether legal or not legal, they would just take it and sell in the black market, the policeman. So therefore, he was also-- he and his wife, they both making a living of this smuggling of food and produce from villages, just like their friend [? Sokolski, ?] the chauffeur.

He was just lucky enough not to get caught. Or when he realized there was a raid of the train, I mean, the simple gimmick was to sacrifice whatever you were carrying, leave it, and move to another carriage, another compartment, and pretend you know nothing about this package of eggs, and butter, and stuff. So this is, more or less, Aleks's early history, about some of his instinct and survival.

So he was in his 40s about then?

Let's see, that when-- no, he was in his late 30s, mid 30s, early 30s actually. Let's see, he was born in-- I think it was 1909 or something like that. And that was '43. So he was about 34 or 35.

So the deal was when all the family's present, I'm just one of the family. Shortly thereafter, right after I came, getting a little bit crowded, and he wanted some sort of a paper to wave if somebody sees me and so on. He sent his nephew back to his mother. And I adopted his name.

So for him, I am still Gienek. Gienek is the Polish diminutive for Jean-- Eugene, Jean. And probably is Gienek, which is about the same thing. And for Aleks, I'm still Gienek. When I speak to him, I refer to myself as Gienek.

When, I call him, for instance, I would say, hi, Aleks, how are you? Gienek here. And he knows, although the original Gienek, the nephew, is also here in this country. He re-adopted him after the war and brought him with him to the States.

The guy lives-- well, he is half-time in New York City, half-time in Florida, like many people like this. But anyway, Aleks-- so whenever someone came in, knocked on the door, I was supposed to disappear, make myself scarce.

What would you do?

Wardrobes, crawl under the bed-- well, we didn't quite know. It was something we developed. So initially, it just didn't work too well. People would come in, neighbors, especially, when I was still in bed in the morning. And I was curious when there was people, would hide, but also peep out. I was still a child playing-- it was kind of a hide and seek game for me still.

Do you remember it being exciting?

Of course. Well, new surroundings and also, OK, getting also-- suddenly, there were-- I was always the oldest brother, OK? Now, there are other kids, or at least this boy, was A, older, 2 and 1/2 years older.

And he decided to show me who's boss. He's going to teach the little Jew kid who's boss. We became good friends afterwards. But initially, well, he had to prove his macho thing. This is quite obvious.

I didn't use the terms, but even then I understood that we will eventually be friends, once he shows that he is bigger, and stronger, and so on. I was, of course, far more intelligent in mind.

Do you think it was because you were a Jew? Or would any young male coming into the house invading his territory would he feel threatened, do you think?

Well, probably-- and it's 50-some years of retrospect, obviously. I mean, and you're asking a psychologist. But I think it's a little of both. You have to remember, he was a Polish boy. Part of it was just male territory, obviously.

But part of it was he was a Polish boy. And Poles, no matter what the age, where they grow up, especially this family, and the social stratum, they actually imbibed their antisemitism with their mother's milk.

The intellectuals are ashamed of it. They hide it. They make excuses, even when they are young. The common Pole don't make any excuse. They are antisemites, period. And they still are. There are no Jews there, but they still are.

Even Aleks. I mean, he's like a father to me. And I owe my life to him. But he's a little antisemite. In his speech, he differentiates. He'd say, he's talking of Poles and talking of Jews as being a separate entity. Well, he's a Pole, but he's Jewish, or something like that, and so on.

And in Poland, when you talk to Poland, they ask you where are you from? I'm from Israel. Oh, there's-- I was there shortly after the 50 years' celebrations of the-- in '93, 50 years of the Warsaw ghetto. There were many Israelis and so on. Oh, there are many of yours, like we're some kind of monkeys, OK?

I mean, you can tell racism when you hear it in body language and so on. When you talk to a Pole, you feel it. And I'm not too sensitive. And I'm not one of those who says, well, if you feel a drop of rain, you say, those antisemites spitting on me again. I'm not one of these.

But the Poles are-- it's part of their makeup, the national makeup. So anyway, we were-- I was not very adept at this hiding. And after a few weeks, one of the neighbors, probably a kid, saw me, and told his parents, and so on. And OK.

By that time, it was Easter.

Were you supposed to stay in all the time?

Of course.

OK.

I didn't exist. Nobody was supposed to know that I exist. Because once it's known that there is an extra child in that house, then there are problems, because would rattle. So there are very few people who were privy to the secret.

Well, this Aleks said, not even the immediate family-- the immediate family, of course, was there, and his sister, and her boyfriend were the only ones who were privy to the secret. The others, some maybe let on to guess. But others-- neighbors, relatives, cousins, and so on were not supposed to know.

Well, let's put it another way-- Mary, I mean, something that I wasn't really that-- she said something a few years ago. Well, I was different from all the other kids on the block. All kids have secrets, especially little girls have secrets. But the secrets are to be told to your best friend.

I had a secret, a real one. I couldn't talk about my secret. And it was overwhelming. It was so big, I couldn't have any other secrets. So they didn't know my secret. I had no friends. That's part of it. I mean there is the--

Were you ever tempted?

Pardon?

Were you ever tempted to tell someone?

I? Well, I couldn't tell anybody. And there, I couldn't see people. But I knew that if I want to survive and not get the whole family killed, I better follow the rules. Just to show you, well, I'll come to it to-- and exceptionally [INAUDIBLE].

Now, I was not very adept at this hiding business. But Aleks, again, because of his instincts, he realized that these arrangements, like wardrobe and so on, was not very good, because well, neighbors would come and want to see a dress and so on. And it just wouldn't work. And so he set up a hiding place for me in the kitchen cabinet behind the sink. And I would crawl in there.

How big was it?

Well, it wasn't very big.

Would you sit in it?

No, I had to lie down.

Could you lay in there?

I had to lie down there in darkness.

Did you have to pull up your legs? Or could you stretch?

No, I could stretch out. I think I could stretch out. I think I could stretch out.

Could you see anything when you were in there?

Barely. Actually, OK, that worked for a while. But then there was this kid there, I think, a neighborhood kid, maybe four or five-year-old, younger than I am. And he was there playing.

And I was curious and bored to death. And I thought I heard, imagined I heard, or pretended I heard somebody say, you may come out. So I popped my head out. And the kids saw me. And they tried to distract them. But it didn't work.

Well, also, by that time, I think this is Easter and Passover, in that period of time. I was there for the duration, because the ghetto uprising had started. And Aleks used to wander for days around the walls, hoping that maybe we'll get some sort of a sign, or maybe some member of the family will manage to get out.

Nobody did. They were all sent to concentration camps-- Grandma and the others to Majdanek. Anka somehow got to Auschwitz. She didn't survive.

Who is that?

Anka, the aunt that ran the family. I mean, she was separated from Grandmother and so on. She actually managed to get a letter. In Auschwitz, about a year later, or maybe six months later, or eight months later, or something like that, she managed to run into some Polish friends who were-- there were Poles also interned at Auschwitz for various infractions, of non-Jews.

And she ran into an acquaintance there. And the Poles were allowed to write their families, had some prisoner's rights. And she managed to send a letter or two, a message in a letter of a Polish friend, and so on.

That's how I know, through our brother-in-law and so on, the kid who was visiting every once in a while. But Aleks, OK, so anyway, Easter, usually, we were poor.

There was very little to eat. Normal fare would be bread, onions. If we had oil for the onions, it was good. If not, with vinegar. Tea was well, substitute coffee made from chicory or burned wheat, some other grain. And even that was scarce.

So you brewed some of this stuff, and use it to color water, and call it tea, usually with sweetener and not. But this was not something that I had to eat while they were eating. But for Easter, they managed to buy some food on the black or gray market. And there was food.

Was tea a big drink in Poland?

Pardon?

Was tea a big drink?

Yes, much more than coffee. Poles, today, they probably do. But in those days, they hardly drank any coffee. Coffee was not. I don't think I ever had any coffee as a child.

So did you eat pretty much what the family ate?

Of course, everything the family ate.

Yeah.

The meals were common. But that's what was available. Let's put it this way, I mean, we would eat onions like we are going to eat apple, you know, biting into them, because the onions were cheap and available. There was some sort of jam made out of carrots and beets with sugar, and artificial sweetener, and gelatin, and so on. These were the type of things there.

But for Easter, there was food prepared. Then there was a knock on the door. The family opened the door-- police, Polish. We have a signed complaint that you are hiding Jews here. And I am under my kitchen sink.

You were?

Yes. I could hear them.

The minute the door knocks, you go under.

Yeah, sure. So we go, and saw, and they say. Somehow, they managed to get rid of them, put all the indignation and so on, I think he wasn't at home, or something like that. They left.

The following day, they returned. And this time, things were more serious. But at that time, that was really Easter. And at that time, his sister's boyfriend was there. And he was a drunk. But he could control his mouth while drunk.

Could?

Yes, he could.

Could.

And that's why Aleks trusted him enough to keep it on as a secret. And he was there. And he recognized one of those policemen from some bar. He had met in some bar.

So he goes up to this guy, pretends to be drunk, hugs him, and so on. You so-and-so, son of a bitch, how dare you accuse my brother-in-law of hiding Jews. Don't you know that he's antisemite? Come and leave us with all this nonsense.

Here, I have a bottle here. I know how fond you are of vodka and so on. There's plenty of food. The family just prepared for Easter. Come on, let's sit down, and eat, and forget this nonsense.

And somehow, he talked these policemen into sitting down. And they sat down and sat there. They arrived about 7:00 PM or so. They sat there till 3:00 or 4:00 AM. And I was there. At some point, one of the family came, I think, brought me some sort of a pot or something like that, because I had to go. They wouldn't let me out.

Aleks also said-- at some point or other, they started drinking and eating. And gradually, they opened up their jackets. They took off their guns, put them on the table.

And at some point, Aleks told me later, and still tells me, that he was contemplating grabbing the guns, killing those policemen, and making a run for it. Fortunately, he decided not to, because they did not return the following evening. But then, of course, we couldn't stay there, because OK, either those policemen, or some other ones, or the same neighbors who rattled once would do it again.

You figured it was unsafe.

He figured. He did the figuring. I didn't do any figuring.

OK.

I was reading. And it was not a book household and so on. But they knew that they had to provide me with reading materials. Otherwise, I would go crazy.

Now, were you awake that whole time, from 7 o'clock till 3:00 in the morning?

To the best of my recollection, yes. Well, I knew what was happening. I mean, that's how scared I was. And so I can tell today. Whatever I tell will not represent the feelings of that night.

Aleks went out-- and here we come to his survival abilities and so on-- found another place in a distant suburb. And we moved. But I don't exist. How do you take me out of the apartment? How do you take a non-existing child out of an apartment?

How did they?

Well, he had this couch. And there was this box inside the couch for bedding and stuff. So he drilled some holes in that. There was this piece of plywood in the bottom. And so he drilled holes for air and put me in there.

And when the movers were taking the couch down the steps, he told them that he had packed glassware in that couch, so they should be very careful carrying it down. And that's how I was moved to his new place. And the new place was far away, a distant suburb.

Still in Warsaw proper?

Well, Warsaw, but away from the central part of town, away from downtown, and therefore, fewer of the friends and so on came to visit. So it was getting a little bit more relaxed. And they also had to make a living. And he said, well, I'm doing one dangerous thing. I'm not going to do other things that are dangerous.

He started a candy factory at home. He found a friend or an acquaintance who knew how to make candy. This caramel candy was made with sugar and milk. He just took milk and sugar and cooked them till he got it partly caramelized.

And then as you cool off, roll it into big strings, and cut them, and wrap them in a piece of paper. The duty of the children was to-- the wrapping was our part. And he used to take them and sell them on the market. So we lived on that for a while.

That was summer of 1943. And OK, I became an expert on what's going on in the war, and the geography, and so on. He used to bring the underground papers that would-- I would read the German propaganda papers, and the underground, telling you where the war was and the fate of the war.

'43, that was Africa and the German defeat in Africa, and later on, I think North Africa, Tunisia. Probably, the landings in Italy were, well, late '43. They were late '43, maybe early '44. Anyway, I became the expert on it.

Were you aware of the ghetto being annihilated?

Yes, of course.

Could you see it? Could you hear it?

No, I couldn't hear it. Well, first of all, before I moved-- from the suburb, you couldn't hear it, because it was a few miles away from the ghetto, maybe 10 miles. But I could probably hear the shooting where we lived in that place.

And then, well, Aleks told me what was going on. He told me that he had-- I knew that he was going out and wandering around the walls, hoping that one of the family might be able to escape and look for him. He may have had prearranged meeting places for such contingencies, at least that's what he says today. There were certain places that he had arranged for as contingency meeting places. So made the rounds there, to no avail.

And through living there, then there was a-- in summer of '43, there was epidemic of scarlet fever in Warsaw. All kids, all children got it. Urik, Aleks' son, got it, was the first one to get it. And he was taken to the hospital.

Officially, children of scarlet fever to go to the hospital for quarantine purposes. So he went to the hospital. And he was saving half of his medicine so that his sister would not go to the hospital, and I could get some of it, and so on.

So we all got scarlet fever. And the apartment was fairly big. And a few people came. And there were more rooms there, so I was just laying half-dead. I actually-- well, Bumek, my aunt's brother-in-law, he used to come every once in a while. He was a physician by training.

So later, he diagnosed my disease is a combination of scarlet fever and diphtheria both. And I was lying there half-dead, running a temperature of 41 C, which is 103 or something like that.

At one point, just to show you what Aleks was all about, I wouldn't eat anything, couldn't eat anything. So he went out and bought two white rolls with some butter. And usually, we had just black bread.

And he was carrying these rolls through the room in which his daughter was in bed. And that was Mary's bed was. And she saw the rolls, said, oh, daddy, I haven't seen rolls since the war started.

And he said, well, sorry, you are not as sick as he is. You can eat bread. He hasn't eaten anything in two or three days. I have to go. And the rolls are for him. And he sat by me and fed me crumb by crumb. About the time of the scarlet fever--

Was he really the nursemaid, then?

Pardon?

Was he the nursemaid, primarily, for you?

Yes.

Tending you while you were sick.

Yes. Well, let's put it this way. Mela was a great woman. But she didn't have his nerves, and his strength, and his so on She was afraid for her own life, for the life of her children, and so on.

So later, for years, at some point, she would say, oh, I'm going to leave you. Children, come. We'll leave him with his Jews. And I'll take care of you. Years later, she wouldn't go anywhere, intend to go anywhere.

Years later, she was ashamed of it. And she put all this emotional stuff. When someone would mention it, she would mention, she would bring it up, and start crying, and can you forgive me for that, and so on. She was a great woman. And I don't think he could have done what he did without her cooperation, help. Anyway.

Was there a hiding place for you in that house?

There was a hiding place, but that wasn't-- first of all, the visitors were fewer in between. There were more rooms. There was more rooms there and so on. So there was a hiding place. But I was also more adept at this game and so on. And there were fewer visitors. So there was more freedom of running around the house.

You still wouldn't go out?

No, never.

I didn't exist.

OK.

I wasn't there. Then Abraham Bumek, that [INAUDIBLE], came and said, well, I have a problem. The other child, my second brother, Shalom, the place where he is, he's in a shed with a goat, very little food, very little care. He's filthy, full of lice, and so on. He's not taken out of there, he'll just starve to death there. I'm bringing him over.

Aleks said something like the more the merrier or something like that. I mean, whatever. So he came to live with us. And really, he was filthy, but Mela washed him and cleaned him. And I used to stroke his hair. I still remember it. It was this layer of dark soot or whatever, about this thick on his scalp under his hair.

He contracted scarlet fever too. The rest of us were sort of recovering. Scarlet fever has all these kinds of complications. And he was so emaciated that he didn't live through.

Did what?

He didn't live through. He died. One morning-- first, he got some sort of kidney complication and so on. One morning, he wasn't feeling well. One morning, he said, well, let me go to the bathroom. I think I have a stomach ache. And if I go to the bathroom and empty it out, I may feel a bit better. So he went and he sat on the toilet. And after a little, he got on there, and he was dead.

Another non-existent child. What do you do with a non-existent body now? Aleks put him in a little basket kind of a trunk. You know, there are these basket weave trunks? You may have seen one in the old days. It's quite common in Europe. He put him in one of these, went down to the cellar, dug a big hole, and buried him there. Then I got very sick again.

Again?

Well, yes, as a result of a scarlet fever and diphtheria. I was recovering from that. But I had a infection of my middle ear. And again, [? Galar ?] came and said, well, if I know what it is, as far as I know, he needs an attention of a specialist, probably surgery. I don't know of any cure for this thing.

So Aleks went out, looked up, found a ear-nose-throat specialist, brought him in. And he examined me. And he said, well, if this child, there's not a surgery within the next 24 to 48 hours, he'll probably die. It's very advanced and so on. You have waited too long. He needs emergency surgery.

So he tells him, all right. I'll tell you the truth. He's not my child. He's a Jewish child. And I'm keeping him here. What can you do? When I speak of instincts and survival instinct itself, these are the things I'm thinking about.

Now, I wasn't there during this conversation. But it was related to me then and many, many times over. And this doctor says, well, I'm bound by the Hippocratic Oath. So I don't care whether he is Black, Jewish, whatever. He's a sick child.

But there are complications. This is major surgery. I cannot do it here. I need my operating theater. I need a hospital. And let's. And this is going to cost money.

Money?

Money. The candy business wasn't doing too well with all those illnesses and so on. Aleks didn't have a penny. He needed money for the doctor. He needed-- he didn't want a second child to die on him.

He went out, sold the apartment, bought a room, which is about the size of this one, no kitchen, I mean, everything. This was kitchen, bathroom on the fifth floor somewhere in town. And he used the proceeds, the difference to pay the doctor.

To get me to the hospital, he bandaged my head all over the place, took me on the streetcar to the hospital, left me there. And after surgery, after I got out of the anesthetic, woke up from the anesthetic, about an hour later, bandaged again, wrapped up.

There were no taxicabs. There were these horse-driven buggies that served as taxicabs in Warsaw. He put me in one of those and brought me to the new place. The family moved their belongings, whether they took with them while I was in the hospital. I was in the hospital for less than 24 hours.

Because it was not safe to leave you there?

Because it was not safe. Any nurse--

Could tell you were Jewish.

--could tell I was Jewish, even by looking at my circumcised penis, for instance, or any other way. That's at least what the doctor recommended. And he has to come to change my dressings, but charge. Well, OK. His Hippocratic Oath, worked but to a limit. It had to be supported by money. It's that. No way to complain.

OK. So I started to wake up. And by then, about the same time, when we're living there, [? Galar ?] Bumek Abraham came again and said, well, I have one more. Now, there's a third kid. He had a wonderful time. He was with this woman.

This is your other brother?

Yes, David--

David?

--the surviving one.

The young one?

The young one. He had a wonderful time. He spent a wonderful summer with a woman who presented him as a grandson in a native village in rural Poland somewhere and so on. He used to run out in the sun, little children.

And these village's children go out to pasture with the animals. Little ones take the geese. And the bigger ones take the sheep. And the big ones, like this eight, nine-year-old take the cows. He was running around the geese. But summer ended. The woman had to return to Warsaw. And she couldn't take care of him in Warsaw. So he came.

When was this?

August '43. This whole thing with the police, with the candy, with the scarlet fever, and so on, lasted about five or six months, this whole thing. I was recovering from the operation.

Five or six months that you were with him?

Yes.

Yes.

I was recovering from that operation. Now, the family had to eat. All the money went to pay my doctor. He met-- well, he was the kind of guy, I mean-- I don't know. I'm not going to say why and so on, because I just want to.

Well, he started helping a 16 or 17-year-old boy who just before the war had broken an ankle and didn't heal. And he had this festering wound on his ankle and so on, with a heavy limp. He took him under his wing. He helped him, bought him shoes, and so on.

And this fellow had a sister. And she was making a living selling little children's booties on the market. And she vouched for Aleks. And he got some booties on credit, went to the market, and among other things, he also is a great

salesman. He sold the booties and so on.

Then he went into an acquaintance in the market, was selling furs. And he was making horse hide and making fur coat out of horse hide and rabbit hides. And they were selling them on the market. And they had three or four women who would go around the market and peddle his coats.

The guy-- Aleks said, all right. Let me try to sell it for you. Well, he was selling the guy fired all his other saleswomen and so on, because Aleks was selling more fur coats than the guy could make. So the family--