

That was close enough, all this.

You want to try and keep eye contact with me. These guys aren't here.

Yeah, OK. I'll look straight at you. OK.

This is just a warm-up question, but can you tell me about your family's attempt to move to the US in 1922?

Yes. My mother and father at that time-- and they had a little girl about four years old.

Can you incorporate that [INAUDIBLE]?

Oh, yes, yes, OK.

[INAUDIBLE] [? next 10 minutes or-- ?]

Would you repeat the question?

Can you tell me about your family's attempt to move to the US in 1922?

My family attempted to move to the United States because most of their family were living here, and they wanted to join them. And when they arrived in the United States, they had to go through Ellis Island, and when the doctors examined my father, they found he had a touch of TB. And they would not let him get out of the boat. They gave my mother and the child permission to get off the boat but not my father.

And so my mother got off the boat to visit with the family, but then she went back to Ellis Island and stayed with him. His brothers make an attempt to try to get him off through maybe the senator and the representative, but they could not. But they were successful in getting him to Canada, and when they got him to Canada, he stayed there for a while. And they attempted to get him into the United States, which was a mistake because they caught him.

And as of that, he was banned ever to come to the United States. So my mother and child-- in the meantime, while my mother was in Ellis Island with my father and the child, the child contracted diphtheria and died on Ellis Island.

And they went back to Europe, and they started life again. And then they had-- my sister was born in 1923. I was born in 1924, but my father passed away three months before I was born.

Tell me how old you were and what you were doing, what life was like when war broke out.

Well, in 1939 I was 15 years old, 15 and a half years old. I was actually going to-- I had finished what you call here sixth grade, like middle school, and we lived in a very small town. There was not high school, and that was one of the reasons my mother tried and decided that it would be best if we would try to get to the United States, because she was not in a position to send us to a high school out of town, which was Vilna. And she felt there was no future for us, so she decided to ask her relatives to send affidavits for us to bring us to the United States.

And they did. So we were sort of in limbo waiting for our papers to come through, and we were on a quota, which took quite a bit of time, about two years. So that's why we were almost-- I was almost 15. I was 15 or 15 and a half, and I still wasn't going to high school because we were waiting to try to get to the United States.

Then, just about in June of 1939, we finally got a letter from the American embassy to come to Warsaw to receive a visa, and the war broke out in September. So there we were stuck again, and the war broke out. And our town was occupied by the Russians. When Hitler and Stalin made a pact to divide Poland, that [? contribution ?] part of Poland was taken over by Russia.

And at first, life was almost the same like it was before, but it was getting-- there was a shortage of food. There was a lot of-- the Russians took over, and they started to take away the homes from the people who had nice homes. And they took away the businesses, and they started to arrest people who-- sent them to Siberia, people who they thought were anti-communist or rich.

And life started to get a bit tougher, and people tried to get out, to go somewhere, but there was no particular place you could go because either it was under the Russians or under the Germans, and the war was in between.

So my sister and I belong to an organization called Betar, which is a Zionist organization. It was very popular in most of Europe, particularly in Poland. As youngsters, you belonged to either Betar or Shomer Hatzair, which was-- one was a left-wing organization. One was a right-wing organization. But it was mostly a social organization with Zionist aspirations, trying to get to Israel and build the Homeland.

And doing the first or second week of the corporation, my sister, who was older, went to a meeting, and there were a bunch of boys and girls like herself, some of them a little older, 17, 18, 20. And they decided they were going to try to get to Vilna because Vilna was a neutral city. It was given to Lithuania during this split. And they thought, well, maybe from Vilna they would try to get to Israel.

We, at that time, had our papers somewhere in Poland, so we thought, well, maybe if we get to Vilna we'll be able to get to the United States. So my sister came home from the meeting that evening and said to my mother, told my mother the story, what's happening. And she told Mother, I'd like to go with them. If we don't get to the United States, maybe we could get to Israel.

And of course, my mother said she was out of her mind. What are you talking about? But she was very insistent, and my mother realized that things were getting pretty rough and particularly for people who belonged to Betar because the Russians considered them as the right-wing organization against communism because they arrested a number of people from that organization.

So she was quite concerned, and she didn't know what to do. And she thought she would seek advice from one of the elders in town, and she went to [? who was ?] our next door neighbor. She went to him and spoke with him, and that was on a Thursday. I remember the days because-- I don't have the days exactly, but the day. And she told him the story, and he says, well, it's very dangerous. They're two young girls. How can you send them away?

And he says, tomorrow, which is Friday, is Shabbat, and he says, why don't we think about it during Shabbat? And he says, we'll see. She came home, and in the meantime, that group was getting ready to go. And my sister felt that she wanted to join that group, and it was getting really more dangerous.

So my mother decided get advice from this other person who was a-- he was the principal of the Hebrew school, Tarbut, and his wife was a kindergarten teacher. And they were a young couple who came to our town, and my mother befriended them.

They used to come and spend every Shabbat, Friday night with us because being-- my mother tried to have a male influence in the family since there was no father. So he used to always come on holidays with his wife, and they used to have dinner with us and perform all the services. And it was like a adopted family, and he was a very fine, cultured, and progressive man.

So they were coming for dinner that Friday night, and we got to talk about it. And of course, we talked about it and asked his advice. And at that time they had two little children, just two little girls, and he says, well, you know, my little girls are too young for journeys like this, he says, but if your daughters were my daughters, he says, I would send them because maybe they'll have a chance to get through.

And my mother made up her mind to send us away, and right there at that night she took out the little valises, what we have, and there were-- what do you call that-- [INAUDIBLE] and started to pack our belongings that she wanted to give us. And he went to a neighboring farm, got a farmer and a little wagon, and brought him back to the house, and picked

up the wagon with our things.

And then he came back, I remember, just like in the middle of the night, and my sister and I got into the wagon. And they covered us with blankets and stuff so we wouldn't be seen, and my mother was sitting with the driver, with [INAUDIBLE]. You know how the wagons are. There's room for two people.

She was sitting next to him, and she had a kerchief around her head to look like she was his wife and they were going to somewhere, to a market or somewhere. And we took off right there that night, and the train was about 100 miles away from our town to go to Vilna.

Oh, that's the other line, but I won't--

Well, we can take a break, and we can break it up.

Roll again. Yes sir. Stand by.

So let's go back, and then I'll keep--

You're going to piece it together?

Yeah. [INAUDIBLE].

OK, that's your job. You asked me a question.

A little bit more concise.

Less detail?

Less detail. Some of the detail is great. Some of it--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

I see. I don't know which one, OK, OK.

Anyway, tell me about-- you had applied for a US visa, and what year it was, in June.

OK, I'll start now. Well, we applied for the four US visa actually like in 1937, and we were waiting for-- we were put on a quota, and we were waiting to be called to come for the visa. And we got a letter from the United States embassy in June of 1939 to come to Warsaw to pick up the visa in November of 1939, and then the war broke out in September of '39.

So there was no way to get to Warsaw to get--

No, nothing, or even get in touch or even-- it was just-- first of all, the war was over in three days for Poland. Three days, it was finished. The Germans occupied Warsaw right away, and the Russians occupied-- they came into our town the second day. The first day or the second day, I believe, in the morning, we hear planes flying over our town, and there were reconnaissance planes, I believe because in our town there was a Polish garrison stationed. And they wanted to make sure what the situation is there.

So when the planes went over the town, they saw the barracks, everything was empty because they left for the front the first day. So there were no soldiers or anybody in the barracks. And then the next day, they just marched with the tanks.

And how did the Russians treat you? Hold on a sec.

They treated us--

Stop, stop.

Oh, the Russians--

Sorry, I was talking.

I'm sorry. The Russians-- when they marched in, they were pretty decent. They didn't mistreat us. But once they got settled into those barracks and all, what happened was there were always-- we were very close to the Russian border, not far, and there was always a communist element in town who were communists. And when the Russians marched in-- but it was illegal to be a communist in Poland. You couldn't be-- it wasn't legal.

So once the Russians marched in, they came out of the woodwork. They became the rulers, the local communists. So when they-- and then, of course, also what they did was they pointed out to the Russian generals, whoever occupied the town-- they pointed out the people that they wanted to get even with like big merchants or if you were more of a-- what do you call it-- the other party, a more right-wing party. And they started to arrest people or take away their homes.

Now, in our case, they took away our home. They took away most of the home. They left us one room and the kitchen. And my mother, and myself, and my sister-- and we had a family housekeeper who was with us. We all lived in that one room, in the kitchen. They took away the others because they felt it was too luxurious to have four rooms or five rooms. So some officers moved into our home.

And then how were you able to escape and leave, and why didn't your mother go with you?

OK, now that was-- the reason-- when we decided to leave, the Russians still did not move into our home, but they told us we could only live in that part, that somebody is moving in, they're taking it away. That's one way. They didn't know.

And the reason my mother didn't come with us was just she couldn't see leaving her home. She says, how could I leave all this? She just couldn't see it. They didn't think it was-- she didn't think it was final, and it wasn't final at the beginning because the border was still open until after a couple of months. They closed the border between Vilna and Russia. And then she used to come and visit us once we left.

Now can you start and tell me the night that you left? Tell me that story of how you left and how you got to Vilna.

OK. Now, when we took this train when we--

Got back to your house.

When we decided to leave-- Mother decided to send us away. She packed us up, and this friend of the family helped us. And we got into the wagon, and we drove down to the train station. We got to the train station. There was like daybreak, and the train was standing there. And there were thousands, thousands of people trying to get on the train.

And the train was packed, and people were going through the windows and between the trains. And my mother just-- and we had two small-- one of those little valises and a bag. My mother just pushed us on the train, and just as she pushed us on the train, she sort of threw the two valises after us, and the train took off. We never got even a chance to say goodbye to her.

And we arrived in Vilna. It was, I would say, like about two-hour ride by train, and we arrived in Vilna. And one of the reasons that she felt a little bit better about sending us is because she sent us to a friend of hers who was running a rooming house. So she gave us a letter and sent us to stay with him. And when we got there from the train, they used to have those horse-- I didn't take off the other line. Yeah, I'll [? do-- ?]

One of the things that I need to get from you is-- I've never escaped from any place. I have no idea what it was-- were

you scared? Were you-- did you have bad dreams? Were you frightened? Were you lucky?

Well, you asked me the question--

Let me [? ask the question of, ?] where did you stay, or what happened once you got to Vilna?

Yeah. When we arrived in Vilna, we stayed with a friend of my mother who was running a rooming house, and when we arrived there-- the capacity of my house maybe had been maybe 20 people. There were about 40 people already. But he made room for us. He gave us-- we were six, eight people in a room. But he was very good. He and his son were running the rooming house.

And we stayed with him for a couple of weeks, and then the [INAUDIBLE] and the Joint Distribution-- those two organizations. There were thousands of refugees who were escaping from all over, coming to Vilna. And they got into the act, and they tried to find housing for the refugees.

They formed kitchens, and they started-- what they did was they formed what they called an internat. It was like hostels. They took over empty buildings, schools or places like that, and they turned them into hostels where people had a room where to sleep. And they had kitchens where they used to-- it was very, very well-organized.

And so after a while, we moved in-- and the way they did it was by groups. Betar had one hostel, and then there were couples who-- they made a hostel for couples and elderly people, and so it was easier for them to take care of the people that way.

And we joined the Betar hostel because, first of all, we had no money. Mother gave us \$50 that she had, and of course, we couldn't stay with these men for a long time, because it was his way of making a living. So we used some of that, and so we moved into that hostel.

And it was like a communal life where you took turns in the kitchen and in cleaning the bathrooms, and it was very organized. And we lived there until six months later. The Russians marched into Vilna again. They took over a Vilna, and then the hostel-- then everything was closed up because they would not allow any relief organizations to function.

Were you afraid?

Yes. Yes, we were very frightened because-- I remember having nightmares quite a bit. We were eight girls in a large room, and all they had was a bed and a little stand where you kept your belongings. And then, of course, you ate in a communal kitchen. But I remember they had medics, just some people--

I want to know more about how you spend your days. Were you very close to your sister? Did you--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

Oh, my sister and I were--

Sorry. John was still talking.

Oh, I'm sorry. My sister and I had a very, very unusual relationship. We were so close, and we continued being that close to the very end. It was almost unheard of. We were like-- my daughter once said we were two bodies with one soul. That's how close we were.

So did you play--

But it was tough. There was a lot of-- well, the way most of us kept busy was a lot of organized-- from the group from, the Betar, from the internat. There were lectures. There were discussions. There were that kind-- that's the way we kept-- and of course, there was the day-to-day taking care of yourself, helping in the kitchen or whatever you had to do.

But did you play any games, or have any fantasies, or promise that you would buy your sister a cherry sundae when you got to the US?

Well, I don't think we had any of those dreams or games. It was more of a time of surviving, getting through, and waiting, surviving and waiting, waiting to hear if there's a way to get out, waiting-- and there were rumors that, oh, I think there's a-- we heard there's an opening to go to Curacao. There's an opening to go to Canada or to go anywhere. There were rumors.

And they said, oh, there on that street there's an office where you go, and you might be able to get a visa or papers. And you went there, and it was just a dead end. And then we heard a rumor that there was a Japanese diplomat giving out visas in Kovno, and a number of people-- they were giving out visas to Japan that you could go to.

And a number of people tried to go there, and you couldn't go-- you couldn't just get on the train and go to Kovno. You had to have a permit to get to Kovno, and then when you got there-- you were only allowed like a day permit. You couldn't sleep there. You had to come back the same day.

So my sister and I-- when we-- well, I'll tell you [INAUDIBLE]. When we heard--

[INAUDIBLE] let's--

We're going to re-load here shortly.