

Professor Erlich, you're all set?

Again, it's comfortable, the conversation. And please wait for me to finish before you start. Try and just make eye contact with me. Try not to look at the camera. Eddie and Mark aren't here.

But we really want the feel of what it was like. We have no-- the beginning of the war, where were you? Where was your family? What was the situation? Why don't we go?

So you want me to get going? Well, the war started in September of 1939, on the 1st of September. I was 14 at the time, and we lived in Krakow, which, in those days, was in Western Poland, not very far from the German border.

So on the 3rd of September, our family moved away from Krakow, in a sense, escaped from Krakow, sensing that the city might be occupied, and we all went to Lwów, which was in eastern Poland and where my mother came from. And her family was from there, perfectly sure that we would come back very quickly because there was no question in anybody's mind that the Germans would be soon defeated and we would come back to our old apartment in Krakow.

Well, what happened was that, of course, we never came back, and we stayed in Lwów for some time. My father was a judge before the war. My uncle, his brother, was an industrialist, and they were both afraid for their fate after the Russians moved into eastern Poland and took Lwów. And so at that time, they decided to escape. The only free country within reach was Lithuania. It was soon to be occupied by the Russians, too, but Vilnius, in Polish Wilno, was still free in those days, and you could get out. You could get some arrangements.

And so they escaped illegally across the border on New Year's night, 1939 and made it safely to Vilnius, and the arrangement was that they would later send for us, for my mother and me, my aunt and my cousin and that we would follow. And this is actually what happened. In February, we went to a border town not far from the Lithuanian border, and we waited for the guides to come to pick us up. There were two women and two boys, myself-- I was, at that time, already 15-- and my cousin, who was nine.

And we started in February, with the end of February. I don't remember exactly the date. It was a horrible winter, very, very cold. It was about 5 degrees below Fahrenheit. And we were not properly dressed at all. The ladies wore shoes that you would wear on the street in Krakow or any other city but not in tremendous drifts of snow, and the guide was completely unreliable fellow.

We took suitcases, which was, of course, a stupid thing to do because you don't go across the border illegally with suitcases, but the ladies could not part with the things they had. And we took a sled and one horse, and we got as far as we could on the sled. And then he took the suitcases and said, follow me.

And as soon as he left, he sort of disappeared. It was all at night. It was a clear night, but there was no moon, very, very cold. And we all fell into drifts of snow. The ladies couldn't move. My cousin and I also had some difficulty.

So before long, the dogs began barking. The peasants from the village came out. And they said that they would have to take us into custody because if they don't, the Russian patrols will come in the morning, and when they see the footsteps in the snow, they will arrest the whole village, and all the men will be deported to Siberia.

So they took us into that hut. That guide disappeared with the suitcases, and we never saw him or the suitcases since. And we waited in that hut until this Russian border patrols appeared in the morning. They took us into custody and took us to the first prison in a small village not far from the first one and then to a larger town, which was called Radin, which was also the famous because it had the oldest yeshiva in that part of the country, and the prison was actually near the yeshiva.

And then we were separated. I was 15, and they decided that I was old enough to be with men. And the

ladies and my cousin were kept together with women. So this was, for me, a rather frightening experience. I was entirely alone in a small cell with about 20 other quote unquote "criminals" of various ilk, mostly smugglers, professional smugglers.

They asked me what I was in for. I told them for trying to cross the border illegally. And they said, well, give up all hope for ever coming back to Poland. You'll be deported, and you will spend the rest of your life in Russia. Well, that, you can imagine, was pretty scary for a lad that was 15 years old, and I had no idea what my mother was at the time, nor my uncle, nor my cousin.

But it all ended fairly well. After about a week of this business, we were released and asked to return to Lwów, where we came from originally, and this is what we did. We lived, then, in Lwów until the springtime of 1940. I even went to school for a while in Lwów. And then passportization campaign began. We were all supposed to either choose Soviet citizenship or return to the original place of residence, in our case, Krakow.

Since we didn't know at that time yet what Germany would be about-- Krakow was still occupied by the Wehrmacht, not by the SS, and one could get out from German-occupied Poland through Italy, mainly, and then from Italy to Spain and eventually away.

We'll wait for that to finish.

Is that going to be every 15 minutes, that clock?

That was just 10:00, I think.

Just you want to back over the way out of Germany?

Yes. Yes.

Am I doing the right thing?

Yeah, that's perfect, very good.

Good, very clear.

I'm going to go back and maybe ask you like, well, what were the conditions like in the prison? What did you eat?

Yeah, what did I-- it's a funny thing. You told me that I should say things which get people sort of moved. I don't remember those things. I remember only the good things, which is a funny thing how a human being suppresses the unpleasant. So we begin--

Yeah. I guess go back--

So anyway, yes, we went back to Lwów. We stayed there for a few months until the Soviet passportization campaign began. We were under the impression that, once you take a Soviet citizenship, this is the end of you. You will become a Soviet citizen, and you will never get out because we knew perfectly well the history of the Soviet Union for the past 30 years almost, 30 years.

And so we elected to go back to Krakow, hoping that, from there, it was still possible to get out, and we knew of cases of people getting out from there through Italy or through Hungary onto Spain and to Western Europe.

Well, while waiting for the permission to go back, at night, towards the end of June 1940, a tremendous campaign of deportation began. All those people who refused to take Soviet citizenship were deported inside Russia. This was done over three days, all at night, using absolutely every moving vehicle in Lwów. All the cars, all the trucks, all the peasant carts, everything that moved was mobilized. They did it by streets. They had lists of people with addresses.

Can we stop for a second?

That one was probably OK.

Yeah, your-- we can hear that on film.

Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. OK.

Can we just turn the clock off?

We certainly can.

And could you cinch your tie up once more? Just a little bit. Great. My camera's on that shirt, and they just pop out.

I'll go back and-- when you were in prison there, how did you communicate? Did everyone else speak-- what language did you speak?

That was a prison with nothing but Polish prisoners because this was a former Polish territory, and all the prisoners spoke Polish. The language in the cell was Polish. My co-prisoners were actually a nice bunch of people, and they told me that they would be deported to Siberia because this is what they were convinced would happen. This is what probably happened to all of them.

They asked me whether I wanted my mother to know where I was, and I said, yes, but what can I do about this? And he says, oh, we can do a great deal. And they started tapping on the wall, and within a short time, there was another tab. And there was a communication with my mother, so that made me feel a little bit happier.

What we ate-- I really can't remember well what we ate, probably the Russian kasha-- that is the sort of gruel that the Russians love-- and some thin soup. But I don't really remember exactly what it was that we ate.

What I remember very well is the trip on a sled from one of the villages to the prison in Radin. This was in the morning, sort of late morning because the sun comes out very late at that time of the year, and we were on the Russian sled. They are very different from the sleds in America. They are very low, and they are built in a triangular form so that the horse is attached to the top of the triangle and the rest of the triangle acts so that the sled would not tip over, just to keep it on top of the snow rather than sinking into the snow.

There were two Russian soldiers with us, and the trip took a very long time, about more than an hour. And after a while, they got sort of sentimental, and they started singing-- they had a guitar, and they started singing Russian songs. This was the first time that I heard Russian, really, this close by and the Russian songs, which are extremely mournful sometimes. But this was an extremely unusual experience. There was nothing but snow around, these two Russian soldiers, very nice fellows, singing those mournful Russian songs as the sun was getting up.

So that's when-- to come back to the deportations, when the streets that we lived on came up, there was a truck waiting downstairs, and everybody living in that house who belonged to that category that is people who did not want to become Soviet citizens were all deported. And so when we finally ended up on the train in that freight car in which we made our trip to Russia, we were all neighbors, and many people knew each other if not personally at least by sight.

So that's the way we made the trip from Lwów. We were still convinced that we were going west, that is, back to Krakow because this is what the Russian soldiers were instructed to tell us, until this train started moving and when we realized that we are not moving west but east.

The trip took about 10 or 12 days, and around the tenth of July, we came to a small station called Sharya on

the trans-Russia railroad line running from Moscow to Vladivostok. There were Russian officers waiting, and this was actually-- this happened on stops before that. And each of them had a list of desiderata, and he would say three cars, two cars, four cars, depending on how many people they could handle.

Well, when we came to Sharya, he wanted three freight cars, that is, people who were in those three cars, maybe a little bit more than that. And we were asked to get out, put on trucks, and then driven north, and we drove for a day or--

First, could you tell me what were the conditions like on those freight--

On the freight trains, they were pretty awful because we were packed like sardines. There were, of course, no toilet facilities. There was a hole in the floor in each car, and then by the ingenuity of the passengers, we covered this area with a blanket or something. So it was a sort of an improvised toilet. But normally, when there was need to do that and when the train stopped, the Russians would unlock the doors, and everybody went outside trying to find a secluded place.

Food was what they gave us, very little of it, but we had with us some food because the Russians in Lwów told us, please take everything that you can with you because you will need everything. So we took clothes, and we took some bedding, even. And we certainly took some food, so we had enough to last us for the duration of the trip. But if we were to rely on what was given to us by the guards, we wouldn't be very happy, obviously.

Go back to the trucks.

So on the trucks-- again, we were lucky. This whole time the weather was very good. We were in the open trucks, an usual line of trucks extending for about, I would say, half a mile, all of them fueled by wood. This is something which you don't know in this country. I don't know whether the Russians still remember that. They were sort of Ford-like trucks because the Russians had a license from Ford, and instead of a gas tank, they had two tanks attached to the trucks on two sides of the cabin.

And every now and then, the truck would stop. There were piles of small, cubed pieces of wood along the side of the road, and they would put it into those tanks where there was a normal fire and steam. And this is how these trucks were moving.

Well, we were going like this for quite a while. The countryside around us became more and more forested, and finally, we came to a road which was really not a road but a path in the forest. And we went for about 5 miles along that, and eventually, we saw a little brook and a few barracks alongside which were completely empty. They were called barrack number one, two, three, four, and five.

And then we were asked to dismount, and each family was to take one room. And so we ended up-- my mother and I ended up in barrack number one, which was actually a very good barrack as it turned out because it was high up so that water in the fall and in the spring would not get in, and that's where we lived for the duration of our-- we would call it, of course, imprisonment. The Russians called it resettlement.

We were resettled to a different part of the Soviet Union, and for them, it made no difference. We were in Lwów, which was part of the Soviet Union. Now we were in a forest halfway between the Urals and Moscow, about 400 miles northeast of Moscow. And so we were living in a different place. They found nothing wrong with that. There was no sentence of any kind because this was just resettlement.

I needed to cough, and fix your tie again.

My goodness. What's wrong? What's the matter with it?

[INAUDIBLE] down [INAUDIBLE].

It's very slight, but it's helpful.

Thank you.

So did you have any contact with your father at this time?

Well, not immediately, not immediately, but my grandmother, who was from Lwów-- she had no choice about Soviet passports. People who were normal residents of Lwów and the areas occupied by the Russians were simply issued Soviet passports, no questions asked. So she was not deported. She stayed there together with my mother's sister and her husband.

And my father at the time and my uncle were in Lithuania, in Vilna, and they wrote to each other. And we wrote to them as soon as we knew our address, and so, in this way, via Lwów, my father found out where we were. And we began to communicate directly. That is, we would write to him, and he would write back to us.

Now, in that camp, I was 15, and under Soviet law, I did not have to work. You have to work when you are 16, and I was still about six or seven months before my 16th birthday. My mother, though, had to work. The work was in the woods. We were all-- practically all of us became lumberjacks. Nobody knew how to handle an axe. Nobody knew how to handle a saw. There was no mechanical tool whatsoever, no power saws. Everything was done manually.

And we were totally out of it. Well, the Russians were aware of that, and they attached to-- they divided us into brigades, and to each brigade they added a native peasant from those areas. And he was teaching us how to do it.

But before it came to that, I told the commandant of the camp-- there was one commandant and three militiamen under him. That was the whole contingent of the guards-- and I said to him, what's the point of taking my mother to work because she will never do anything for you because she is simply unable to do anything like that? Why don't you take me instead and let her stay in the barracks since I don't have to work?

He liked the idea, and so I, before I was supposed to work, began working. And later on, when I turned 16, they got so used to the sight of my mother at home, that is, in the barracks rather than at work, that she never worked for the length of our stay in that camp. And after a few months, I became an experienced lumberjack, and trade which I still love and which I practice at home. That is, whenever there is a tree to be felled or a branch to be cut, I do it with a great deal of relish, always with manual saws, never using any power saws.

So that's essentially how we got into that camp. The kind of work-- I would say 90% felling trees. There was a stream running through the camp emptying into a larger river which again emptied into a larger river, and eventually, all of this emptied into the river which was called Northern Dvina, which goes north to Archangel, the city of Archangel, where there's a port, and you could then move whatever you could because from that time you couldn't move anything by land.

So our job was to fell trees, cut them according to specific measurements. Every kind of tree, every kind of wood had its own requirements. We were supposed to measure it all and then stack it, and some of us were then, in the wintertime, given sleds, brought sort of the front part of the sled with a tiny horse that they had there. And these wooden logs would then be taken out of the woods and stacked alongside the first big river, which was about 5 miles away from the camp-- from where we were working.

And then in the springtime, when the snows melt, these small rivulets become mighty rivers, and for about-- there is a window of opportunity that lasts no more than two weeks. During that time, all that water has to be pushed into the water and floated downstream to the Northern Dvina. Well, there was an immense amount of wood, and the river, even though it swelled, it was still a fairly small river, so tremendous-- what's the English word for that word?

Logjams?

Logjams, exactly. Tremendous logjams would form, and in this country, as I know from movies, what you do is, when there is a logjam, you dynamite it. There was no question of that. First of all, there was no dynamite. Secondly, anything that would injure a piece of wood, which was valuable property, would be considered sabotage. So we were issued long sticks, which sort of looked like harpoons in a sense, and we were supposed to jump onto those logjams and push, manually, the logs away until, eventually, the logjam became free and everything floated away.

But you were supposed to sense when this moment was coming and jump off from log to log until you came to shore. This was a fairly tricky operation. Of course, all the time you were drenched completely in water.

But in the woods, we were-- cutting itself began with cold weather, which means mid-October or even earlier. Later on snow fell, and the more snow the better because it's easier to move around. It's easier to move the wood around. So we would start from the barracks in our brigades. There were five men in my brigade. The senior wood cutter in the brigade was an engineer from a small town in Poland, and we would march at-- when it was still dark, we would get out of the barracks.

By the time we reach the place where we were supposed to cut our trees, it was just slowly getting light so that the sunrise we would always meet at the place of work. We would leave just before it would get dark, and the trip back was basically in darkness. We would come home, that is, to the barracks, to the camp, when it was totally dark.

What was life like in the barracks?