

Did you make a call?

Yes, and it looks like-- if we could do it [Background talking]

OK, great. So what was life like in these cabins? Did you feel like you had a hard life?

Well, it was a hard life. The worst part of the whole thing was a sense of hopelessness. That is, the war was going badly. We had some news. There was some kind of a local newspaper that eventually would find its way to the camp. So there were no radios. Well, actually, there was a bit of a loudspeaker radio, on which we could get Moscow official news, which was good enough.

But it was quite clear that the war was not going well. The most heartrending time, for me at any rate and I think for many others, too, was the defeat of France because-- that was May 1940-- because somehow-- the camp was all Polish, basically 50% Jewish, 50% Catholic. And we were all raised on this myth of great France, Napoleonic France, which the Poles considered, at least, the friend of Poland, and that the French would certainly be able to deal with the Germans as they managed to deal with them in World War I.

We did not think much about England because people simply did not have any ties with England. America was completely out of it, far away and not interested in the war, and in the meantime, Hitler was doing fairly well. And the defeat of France and the defeat in such a fantastically quick way-- before you could know what was going on, France was already occupied.

It made us feel that this is really an end of an era, that Europe will forever be divided between these two dictatorships, on the one side Stalin, on the other side Hitler, and that the-- especially since they were very friendly in those days because this was before the war between Russia and Germany. So the Germans who happened to be in our camp-- there was a family of Polish citizens but who were of German origin and who declared themselves German. They were treated much better than we were simply because they were German.

And so all the rest of us were convinced that this is the end of the line, that we would never-- I would never see my father, and I would never see my home and any freedom that you can speak of because there was really no running away. First of all, it was really impossible to run away, even though the guards were not numerous. There were only three guards in this commandant.

But where to run to? This was running from a small prison to a larger prison, and eventually you do get caught. And people did run away and were returned to the camp, and a big deal was made of their return.

So this was it. My life, from then on, was to cut timber, and the hopelessness was the worst part of it. As for food, until the break out of the war between Russia and Germany, that is, until Hitler attacked Russia in June 22, 1941, we had parcels of food which my grandmother from Lwów would send us. So this would reach us. My father would help out from Vilna as long as he was there, and locally, we would be getting our rations, which included a little bit of bread and a little bit of-- and in the evening time, there was some kind of soup and sometimes some meat.

But at any rate, the countryside, the forests were just-- you could pick mushrooms, and Russians and Poles are mushroom eaters and are not scared of mushrooms the way people are in this country and know mushrooms so that my mother sometimes would pick a tremendous basket of mushrooms. And that was very good food. In the summertime, there were berries of all kinds, which we could eat.

I could not lie down during our lunch break. We had a half an hour break to eat what we took along with us to work. In the summertime, I couldn't lie down because I would be completely smeared with blueberries. You would have to pick your blueberries first.

In summertime, the greatest scourge during working time were the mosquitoes. The country was-- those forests were completely infested with mosquitoes so that sometimes you would-- if I wanted to sort of sit quietly, I would have to put

a sack on my head. Otherwise, you'd be eaten alive.

When I joined this brigade, in my first days there they said, well, I was too young to work with an axe. That is, my colleagues in the brigade said that, not the Russians. The Russians thought that I was as good as anybody. And so they assigned to me a job which they thought was the easiest, and that was burning branches.

Now, these were all coniferous trees, and they burned like firecrackers. We were all issued typical Russian clothing, which was sort of cotton jackets with quilted cotton inside which burned on contact with any spark. I was supposed to drag-- well, they would chop off the branches, and I was supposed to drag them to this big bonfire which was built when we came to work in the morning and burn them there.

Well, you had to be careful not to stand too close and not to stand against the wind because then everything blew on you. So there was smoke, and there were sparks. And every now and then, I would see smoke coming from my jacket. At the end of the year, I probably had more holes in the jacket than any clothes left.

And it was tremendously hot by the fire and very cold away from the fire, so I thought, at the end, that this was much harder than anything that they were doing because they were simply cutting their trees, chopping branches. And so finally, when I learned to do the same thing that they did, we decided to share the duties, and I then was assigned to the normal tree felling detachment.

Did you develop any lifelong friendships? And how long were you in this camp?

Well, I was there for a year and a half. That is, we arrived in July, I think around the 10th of July, 1940, and my mother and I left on November 7. I remember that well because this is the Russian holiday, the Soviet holiday, of 1941.

Now, everybody else had gone by then. Everybody was released. It's a long story. I don't know whether you want me to go into it, but if you are interested-- well, I have to backtrack a little bit, and this is the part of the Sugihara involvement in this. My father and his brother, my uncle, were those who were issued the Japanese transit visas, that is, first of all, the terminal visa to Curacao, which was a Dutch position, then a Japanese transit visa, and then a Soviet transit visa to get to Japan.

So towards the beginning of-- I'm sorry. In the early fall of 1940, about half a year after we got imprisoned, my father and his brother completely legally left Lithuania with the Soviet transit visa to Vladivostok, which is the Russian port on the Pacific, and from there to Japan on those visas issued by Sugihara against the instructions of his government. This was a most unusual story, sort of like the Schindler story in Krakow. And so they arrived in this country a couple of months before Pearl Harbor, in the spring or early summer of 1941.

How did your father feel leaving you and your mother back in Russia?

Well, I can only imagine how he felt, but he must have felt awful. But for us, for all of us, I told you that our main concern and our main fear was that this would become a permanent situation, and having a father and the husband outside in the free world was the only ray of hope. So we were actually very happy that he got out because eventually we knew that Lithuania, as it did, eventually, would become part of the Soviet Empire anyway, so he would fare no better than me. And besides, having been a judge, that is, a civil employee, in Poland, he would be really treated very roughly by the Russians.

So when they left, we knew perfectly well how they were going. We knew that they would pass within 160 kilometers of our camp because they would pass through the same railroad station, Sharya, where we ended our railroad trip from Lwów because this was on this main line between Moscow and Vladivostok. They came to Moscow. They bought a tremendous amount of clothing still in Lithuania, and from Moscow, they sent us two very large sacks full of stuff. And that kept us going for a long, long time.

Instead of referring to them as "they," can you say "my father"?

Yes, I'm sorry. My father and my uncle did that, the two families because we were separated. To come back through our deportation from Lw³w, as I told you, we were deported by streets. My aunt, and my cousin, and my grandmother lived separately on a different street than my mother and I, so we were deported in different ways. We were deported on the same day, but we made it into different trains. And they ended up in the Ural Mountains, and we ended up in this camp, I would say 400 miles northeast of Moscow.

How'd your mother respond to that?

Well, this is the way it worked. We had no idea until we ended up that we-- of course, we were deported separately, so we knew that we would be separate. But we didn't know, actually, that they were deported. Everything, you see, was done via Lw³w, that is, writing to my grandmother. They wrote to my grandmother. My father wrote to my grandmother, so the grandmother became the hub of all this communication network.

And from her, we learned where they were, where my father was, and this is how we communicated with one another. So they were in the Urals. We were in this district called the Vologda District, and-- sorry-- when I say "they" I mean my aunt, her son, and my grandmother.

And after the outbreak of the Ruso-German war in June '41, the Russians developed, all of a sudden, friendly ties with the Allies, and Russia, from being an ally of Germany, overnight became an ally of the US and England and resumed normal diplomatic relations. And at the same time, they had no choice but to resume and to recognize the Polish government-in-exile in London.

And one of the conditions imposed upon the Russians by the Poles, presumably with the help of the British, was that all Polish citizens imprisoned in Russia-- and there were literally hundreds and hundreds of thousands, if not millions in Russia-- would be allowed to join the Polish Army and released from camps.

This was called the amnesty. There was no sentence, but still, there was an amnesty. This amnesty came out in late August of 1941, and around September time, a man came from the local NKVD district, that is, the Russian secret police, with an edict that all people detained in the camp should be freed as long as they can prove that they were Polish citizens.

Now, again, to backtrack a bit, my father, when he got to Japan, decided that the more foreign documents he sends us the better for us, and he sent us at first an Argentinean visa which did us no good whatsoever because we had no passport to put it on. All of these things were obtained probably in an illegal way. I don't know how he did it in Tokyo.

And the last document that he sent us was an actual Chilean passport. That is, my mother got a Chilean passport, and I got a Chilean passport, completely valid Chilean documents, for which he must have paid some sum of money. These documents came through official mail. The Russians opened the mail regularly. And so the commandant called us in, and he said, what is this?

Well, we said we didn't know, but I could read what it said, that these are Chilean passports. He requisitioned the whole thing. We never saw them again. When the amnesty was announced for Polish detainees in the camp, everybody was allowed to go. When our turn came, he said, you stay. We said, why? That is, my mother and I. And he said, because the amnesty is for Polish citizens and not for Chilean citizens.

Well, this was the last thing that we counted on. But there was no way out, so we started bombarding the Polish embassy in Kuibysheva-- at that time, the foreign embassy from Moscow were already evacuated because the Germans were very close to Moscow to Kuibysheva, a city on the Volga. Today it's called Samara-- and eventually established some contact with them and eventually managed to let my father know, again through the Polish embassy in Kuibysheva, that we were not able to get out, that something had to be done for us to prove that we were Polish citizens.

Well, it took a long time. There was September, and we started doing it immediately when everybody left because it was an absolutely eerie feeling to be in this camp for 300 people, in which there were just my mother and I and the German family who were detained also because now they turned out to be enemies of the Soviet Union. So there were four of us

living there. I had to go to work, except that now I had to go to work with the Russians and not with the Poles because there were no Poles left.

And so it went through October, and November came. November 7 was the big holiday, the anniversary of the October Revolution celebrated in November. And I told my mother, listen, there is nothing we can do here. We will spend the whole winter here otherwise. Let's go without telling anybody to Nikolsk, which was a town region center, a small town, 5,000 people, where there was the local NKVD headquarters.

And so very early in the morning, my mother and I set out on foot, and we went to Nikolsk, and we made it eventually by afternoon. It was holiday. Everything was closed, of course, but we waited until the following day and went straight to this NKVD office to tell this guy what was going on, that our commandant was completely in the dark. He knew nothing what to do-- he knew nothing about those Chilean passports and that we were a normal Polish citizens and should be allowed to leave.

He gave us a tremendous lecture for leaving the camp without permission, and there was a moment when I was afraid that they would really imprison us for this whole thing. But then he softened, and he said, well, it's your luck that just two days ago an order came to release you, and so you go right back to the camp, and you can come back to Nikolsk whatever you are able to do so.

So this was already-- there was plenty of snow all around. We got on a sled with some collective farmers who were going in the same direction, and eventually we made it back to the camp. I guess it was on the 9th of November. By that time, they were convinced in the camp that we had escaped completely. When we appeared, first of all, they were shocked to see us, and secondly, they were immensely angry that we got away without telling anybody because the commandant was afraid that he would be responsible for this.

So when we came, he removed from our room everything that belonged to them, to the camp. That is, all the beds were removed, all the mattresses, the mattresses filled with hay, everything to make our life as uncomfortable as possible without actually imprisoning us, for which he had no authority because we came with this piece of paper from the NKVD in Nikolsk.

We stayed there until we could put whatever we had left together, and then we went back to Nikolsk, again, partly on foot, partly-- there was some collective farmers who were going there-- and wanting to go out, that is, to leave this whole area and move towards those places with the Polish Army was forming.

Well, to our great dismay, we found out that there was simply no way, in wintertime, to get out of there. The place was completely snowbound. There was no transportation available whatsoever, and if one wanted to, I suppose one could go on a sled. But going on a sled 160 kilometers in this winter-- this was not anything that we wanted to try.

And so we were forced to spend the whole winter of 1941 and the beginning of '42 in this small town of Nikolsk, where I found work as a janitor in a local school. And my mother wasn't doing anything. We lived privately in a family of very lovely Russians, a couple who had three sons, and of three of them were killed in the very beginning of the war. They were drafted, and so they almost sort of adopted me as their fourth son. And there we-- I don't know whether I'm not going with too much detail into all this. Well, you'll do with it what you want.

Right. So then you went and caught up with your grandmother, correct?

Well, then what we did-- we tried to get out in the springtime. In the springtime, the only way to get out is by boat. The small river that runs through the city, again, becomes big enough to allow boats to come to Nikolsk, and this is the time when they can ship out whatever they have manufactured over the winter.

And we went on one of those ships to the first railroad station, which is in a town called Kotlas, a horrible town which was the main town for resettlement of prisoners coming from the extreme Russian North. So what you saw there were truly scenes out of Dante, these emaciated corpses walking around completely starved, looking for some way out without any money whatsoever.

The Poles were actually doing better than the Russians because, by that time, the Polish government-in-exile in London organized a network of-- they were called delegaturas, but they were sort of minor consulates all over Russia for Polish citizens who were released. And not only were they helping these people to get out and join the army, but they also had things to give them, food and clothing. Clothing was very important because even if we did need that clothing it could be sold, and the money could be used to buy food or exchange because barter was the main form of trade in those days.

And in the camp, you see, in order to get some potatoes, I would go on Sundays, when we didn't work. I would take a small sled, and I would go with some shirt or some article of clothing and go from one hut to another of a collective farmer, asking whether they would trade some potatoes for the shirt. And occasionally you were lucky enough that somebody would do that, and this is how we got potatoes. But they were exceedingly poor themselves, cows-- should we take it, or not? [PHONE RINGING]

[Background talking]

Were you surprised by the attitude of this Russian family taking you in? Weren't they supposed to be your enemies?

No, no. That is the great difference between Russia and Germany. We had the feeling that we were-- of course, we were mistreated, but the Russians around us were mistreated as well. And to the Russians, we were a novelty. We were, in many ways, a breath of fresh air coming from what they considered the West, and they were hungry for stories how life was there before the war.

They were tremendously friendly throughout. My personal experiences in Russia and my personal relations with the Russians are invariably excellent, and I love going back to Russia.

Did you speak Russian at that point?

By that time, I began learning Russian. You see, this was the-- in the camp, I learned nothing because we were all using Polish to each other. We learned enough to understand those Russian guides who were with us and who taught us how to do this or that, but our normal conversations were in Polish. So I knew no more Russian at the end of this detainment as I did when I started.

I started learning Russian when I came to this town of Nikolsk, speaking with the old man, the Russian, the father of the family, a charming family. They would share with us their food, and really, I was sorry to leave them when we were actually going away to that railroad station in Kotlas.

So this was just one of the many very happy experiences with the native population, not necessarily Russian. They could be of any Soviet ethnic group. For instance, later on, when we lived in Central Asia, in Tajikistan, the Tajiks were awfully nice. They are related, at least linguistically, to the Afghanistanis.

And we lived in an Armenian family, and these Armenians were-- you couldn't imagine a nicer family. Again, both my mother and I were completely sort of adopted into their families. Whenever there was a family holiday, we were involved in it, and this is quite a story, those Armenians. If there is time, I would be happy to talk to you about that.

[INAUDIBLE]

Yeah.