

[TEST TONE] Set a transcript card.

Yeah, transcript's away, October 18th-- August 18th, 1999.

Yeah, we're rolling.

OK, Max, where were you when World War II broke out?

In my home town by the name of Janow.

When you answer the questions, you're going to have to include the question or the subject of the question. So in other words, when I asked you, where were you when World War II started, you have to answer, when World War II started, I was in. OK? Because we don't know what-- I'm going to be completely cut out.

Yeah.

So when did you-- well, let's try that again. Where were you when World War II started?

When World War II started, I was in my home town by the name of Janow. It's in eastern Poland. And when did you or how did you decide to leave Poland?

I decided from the first minute the Russian came in and occupied our home town. I was already inquiring how to get out of it. How to get out of Russia. Do I keep going or do I answer your questions only?

Well, you can keep going. I mean, I want you to tell--

You can cut anything.

Sure. OK. So why don't we start again. And why don't you tell me what motivated you to leave.

OK.

When the war started. Start at, you know.

When the war started, our part of Poland fell into the Russian hands. From my youth, I was a Zionist and I always wanted to go to Israel. But once they occupied our country, I knew that there wouldn't be any possibility to get out from under the Russian regime.

So I was starting to look ways how to leave my hometown and get out of this part of Europe. And the only places that we could go is either through the Romanian to Romania or to Vilna. Vilna was occupied by the Russians, but they gave it back to Lithuania, which Lithuania claimed it as its capital.

So once we could get to Vilna, it would be under the Lithuanian regime. And from there, there might be a possibility to leave Europe. And in meantime, I started to ask all my friends which I could trust to find out ways if they ever hear of a way how to get there because everything was in chaos.

The only thing, there was still a train going to Vilna through certain stops. And it was a very complicated way to get there. But I found out that Vilna was going to be returned to Lithuania.

Then myself and another two friends, one by the name of Gottlieb and one by the name of Gorodecki, we found out that we can go to Lida. From Lida, I have to take a small gauge train to a certain city at the border of Lithuania and Poland, former Poland. Now, it was Russia.

All right, so can you go back and tell me-- you and a couple friends decided to leave. Did you leave your family behind?

Well, I lived--

So tell me-- you made the decision to leave, and what you took with you, and who you left behind, and what it was like crossing the border.

OK, when do I start. Go ahead. When the Russian occupied our hometown, from the same moment, I started to look for ways to get out of Poland to Russia, whatever it was at that time. That time was Russia. And the only way that was left open was either Romania or Vilna. Which Vilna, by rumors, we knew that this is going to be returned to Lithuania and the Lithuanian government.

And in meantime, we had some friends that lived in Vilna and told us that there are certain ways that you can come to Vilna. And they wrote us a letter and told us that the only way is you have to go to Lida, from Lida, backtrack with a small gauge train to a city on the border of Lithuania and former Poland, which by the name of Oswiecie-- Swiecany, sorry.

I don't need all the details.

It took three--

Hold on. OK. Tell us about it.

It took three months to find the way how to get to Vilna. It wasn't a simple that you go and buy a ticket and go to Vilna. You had to go through many stops. And sometimes, you had to go backtrack sideways till we came to a city by the name of Lida.

And from there, we went to the border between Lithuania and Russia, which was now under Russian government. And from that city, we had to get smugglers. There were special smugglers that took you over the border to Lithuania. Because the Lithuanians didn't let you in. And the Russians didn't let you leave.

So what did you have with you? How did you? Was it in the snow or was it in sunshine?

It was one of the hardest winters in my memory. Snow was up to my knees. And we had to go all night through the woods and through the snow till we came on the other side of the border. And the other side was also a little town. And we didn't know where to turn, but they told us the rabbi lived in this and this place. We went to the rabbi.

It was, by the time we came-- from 12 o'clock to 4 o'clock, we were walking. And at the rabbi's home, of course, they took us in right away and gave us some hot food and some place to lie down to sleep. And we slept till about 8 o'clock. At 9 o'clock, there was a train going to Vilna from there.

We have to disguise ourselves as local people, like peasants. And we put on peasant clothes and a peasant hat. And they gave us even a basket to hold in our hands covered with something, as if we are taking some produce to Vilna. Because the police were all around, looking for refugees which are pouring it into Lithuania, into Vilna. And this way, I came to Vilna.

Coming to Vilna, we had there two friends which right away took us in. And the first night, we slept in their place. Which it wasn't much of a place. It slept two to a very small sofa. And the next day, we went to look for a place to stay.

Of course, we didn't have too much money with us. But still, we had enough to get a room. And we found a place and we moved in there. And in Vilna, there was organizations right away supported by the United Jewish Appeal. At that time was the Joint Committee. And they organized the kitchens for people to come and have dinner.

Of course, breakfast we had in our room and where we lived, with the family we lived. But dinner, we went to the-- it

was called the Club. It was the Zionist organization's club.

And it was a restaurant, which was a very, very welcome. They welcomed us very well. And the food and everything was beautiful like in a four-star restaurant or five-star. And for a very nominal price. At that time, the price was like, say, 20% of a regular meal.

And in Vilna we were looking for ways how to survive because we didn't have too much money with us. So right away, started to look to do some-- to getting into commerce. If somebody want to sell something, I went to try to sell it for him. And this way, I kind of survived.

But the Lithuanians didn't let us stay all in Vilna because Vilna was getting crowded. And besides, they were afraid of too many Polish citizens coming in into Vilna because actually, they took away Vilna from Poland. So they sent us out into small cities, dispersed is as far as it could be dispersed.

And I with a friend of mine by the name of Gottlieb, Bernie Gottlieb, we went to a small city in Lithuania. Over there, we got acquainted with the Jewish community. And they were very nice to us. But we still had my money of our own, we didn't need their support.

And then over there, I started to look for work. I come from a background of-- my father was in the lumber business. And I was an expert in lumber. So I was young, but they I already knew lumber since a child. And over there, I got some jobs in lumber mills as a supervisor.

Let me backtrack a little bit. Who did you leave behind? And how did you feel about that? Why didn't they come with you?

You see, I left my parents and a brother, who was the last year in the Gymnasium. And when I went to Vilna, I didn't know where I'm going, what's going to be there. My brother begged me to take him with me. He was five years younger than I am. And I told him, listen, I am going. If there is a place for you or the place is good for us, then I'll send for you.

Of course, my parents couldn't leave. We were well-established and besides that, we were in the lumber business, we had a flour mill also. And my father, my mother, they were born there, and with a nice house, and well-established.

Nobody wanted to leave because you didn't know what's going to-- you never expected that the Germans will be such beasts what they did to us. So we figured that I'll go, one of us will go, and then see later how to help the others out. And that's why I left by myself.

What was your departure like? Did you-- were you crying?

Of course, we hugged, and kissed, and cried.

Could you start over again? I was talking you, have to wait.

Oh, OK. You see, it took us three months to find out a way how to get out of our hometown. And on a weekend, a friend of mine called me up that he found a way how to get. And I wasn't home, I was 40 kilometers from my hometown, which we had the mill there.

And I came back right away. And Saturday night, we were supposed to leave. I came back Friday. Of course, I didn't tell anybody except a few-- the family. And I went and said goodbye to everybody quietly and told them nobody should know that we're leaving, because if the Russian government would find out that we are leaving, they would arrest us right away.

And then I had a few friends that I said goodbye, and of course, a few girls-- one girl, actually, I said goodbye to. And of course, she was crying, and it was heartbreaking. But we had to leave, I know. And we left in the evening Saturday night. It was on December 20th.

It was so cold that we never, didn't remember such a cold winter. So you had cold and snow, lots of snow. And as I told you, I went by train till Lida. From Lida, I took a small-gauge train to that little town on the border. And over there, we hired some smugglers who took us over.

But we had to walk. You couldn't go by horse and their wagon or by sleigh. You had to walk all the way because you had to be very quiet. And you had to avoid from one side, the Russian border police, from the other side, the Lithuanian.

And after four hours walking, it was very hard and cold. We came in into Lithuania, into that little town. And over there, I stayed a few hours. After having a hot breakfast, we went to Vilna by train. And in Vilna, I came. We had two friends that took us in.

What did you take with you on this trip?

I took with me only two changes of underwear, two shirts, an extra pair of pants, and an extra pair of shoes in a backpack. But I was very warm dressed. And I had a leather jacket but with fur underneath. And this way, we came to Vilna.

Why did you hate the Russians so much and how did you figure out how to get out of Lithuania?

You see, I was born into Zionist family to start with. Israel was our goal in life. As a matter of fact, I had a sister who left our home in 1929 and a brother who left in 1935 for Israel. And they were there. So I was going like home to Israel.

It was very hard to leave Poland because you needed a certificate from the British government to get in into Israel. They had a quota. So many and so many could come in a year. And it was very hard, but somehow, my brother and my sister found a way. And they went to Israel.

And when the war broke out, I was only thinking how to get out and get to Israel. And that was my main goal. We didn't know what's awaiting us in our hometown. Not that I could foresee it, nobody could foresee it. But one thing I knew, I don't want to be under communist regime. That I knew. And my goal was Israel, Israel from the first moment that I was conscious.

OK. Did you realize that goal? And how did you get out of Lithuania?

Well you see, by inquiring all around. First to try, I wanted to go to the Romanian border. By the time we found out how to get to the Romanian border, the Romanians closed the border. Didn't let in any more Polish citizens to go to Romania and from Romania. Even for transit, they didn't let anybody in.

You're going to have to tell me, though, the shorter version. I appreciate all the details. I mean, I understand that you couldn't go to Romania. But you're going to have to-- I need it in like 30 seconds. I know.

OK.

It's hard.

OK.

Hold on, one second, hold on.

Wait a second. Someone's walking upstairs and it's a very sensitive microphone. How's his face, Eddie?

It's holding.

By looking around and asking around, we found out that the Romanian border was closed. They couldn't go out there.

The only place that was left was Vilna. Vilna was still in the Russian hands. But the rumors were that Vilna is going to be returned to Lithuania.

The Russians took away from Poland and now, they're going to give it to Lithuania. Of course, there were some strings attached. They Lithuanians had to give the Russians bases for some of the army and some of the air force. And that's why they came back Vilna to Lithuania.

In Vilna, two friends of ours-- not friends, but acquaintances lived in Vilna already. They were in Vilna already. They left. When Poland was still Poland, they left for Vilna. So they wrote a letter and described a way how to get to Vilna.

We have Vilna covered. I want to know how you got out of Lithuania.

Oh. In Lithuania, after they sent us out to a small city, I become friendly with a Jewish builder who built for the government, for the Lithuanian.

OK. Can you start over again? I don't need the details. I don't need your friend. I just want you decided that you wanted to get out. What did you do?

I went, of course--

You're going to have to start over again.

When we came to Vilna, we looked for ways to get out of Vilna. And we went to all the consulates there were. Of course, the consulates, by the time we came and started to look around, all the consulates left. Because the Russians didn't they don't need any consulate there, you have a Moscow consulate.

And later, when they gave it to the Lithuanians, the capital was Kaunas. So they say, Kaunas they have consulates. But pretty soon, they closed all the consulate in Kaunas also. But there was a Japanese consulate, which they gave him two weeks to wind up his office and move to back to Japan. Because they don't need a consulate there.

But this consul, by the name of Sugihara, he was one of the finest people, most men, [INAUDIBLE] men alive. And he saw what's going on, how they are trapping all the Jews. And he knew, probably, through the government, the Japanese, what the Germans having for-- what they are planning to do with us.

So anybody that came to him for a transit visa through Japan to any country in Latin America and in America or Cuba, any part of America, so he gave a transit visa for two weeks. So anybody had a paper, a certain paper, he came with this paper, and he stamped right away the Japanese visa on it.

I found it out a little bit later. A friend of mine came to me and said that there is a way to get a Japanese visa. But I didn't have any documents with me. So I found out that people are forging documents and selling it. And I paid 1,000 rubles for a certificate that I am a Polish citizen, and I am waiting for a Polish passport. In meantime, these papers should serve me as a Polish-- as a passport for all the authorities.

So I came up with this paper to the Japanese. I went to the Japanese consulate, but he was already on his train back to-- I was too late-- back to Japan. So the people that gave me this passport, this so-called passport, gave me also a Panama visa. And they wanted to give me also a forged Japanese visa. Of course, the Panama visa was also forged.

But the Japanese visa, I say, no, if I'm going through Japan, I want a real visa, not a forgery. I don't want to wind up in somebody else's prisons. So I didn't have a Japanese visa.

But I went and applied to the Russian NKVD for a transit through Russia to Japan. They took the documents and they told me to come back in 10 days. I came back in 10 days. After 10 days, they posted on the wall who should come and pick up their visas. And in 10 days, I had my-- posted my name. I came in.

And the guy that gave out the visas looked at me and looked at the papers, and says, tell me, how much did you pay for this paper? I say, I made myself innocent, two zlotys. Two zlotys was the official government price for a document. So he smiles at me and says no, now, how much did you pay? And I made myself innocent, but he smiled and gave it to me. And I had the visa.

Of course, now I had to buy tickets to get from Russia to Vladivostok and to Japan, which I got. It cost me 150 American dollars. You had to buy it from Russian interest. But you couldn't have any dollars in your pocket. So that was a dilemma. But still, they took it and went in. And when you came to the Russian interest office, they didn't ask you where you got it. They took your money and gave you the tickets.

And I had 10 days to wait for a train. I took a train to Moscow, from Moscow to Vladivostok. But the next day, somebody came to me said the guys that sold you the visa, falsified papers, were arrested and they are giving out names. So you better be careful.

I was staying at that time in Kaunas in a hotel. Right away, I went away from the hotel. And I slept, went to sleep in a friend's house, a private house. And I had a very good friend that had a ticket for next day. And he came to me, says, listen, give me your ticket. I have time to wait. Because all his papers were on the level, no falsification, nothing.

He says, and take my ticket. And next morning, the train is leaving for Moscow. And that was a sacrifice on his side, because under the Russian government, you never knew what kind of law in the next 24 hours will come out. So next morning, I went to Moscow.

In Moscow, they took us in in a beautiful hotel. Because we were as foreign citizens and as transit people. So they gave us the best hotels. Which we paid for it.

And the minute we came there, we started to look for a way to get a visa someplace. Because we knew Panama wouldn't let anybody in. Because the American government closed the canal, the Panama Canal. And they didn't let anybody in into Panama.

So I went first to the American consulate. And I showed them I have a Panamanian visa, I need an American transit. So he looked at me and he says, Panama is a closed place. You cannot get into Panama. So sorry, I can not give you a visa. From there, I went to the English consulate to try to get a visa to Israel.

Can we--

Too much time?

The rain. No, that was good.

It was a plane.