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Oral history interview with Tamara Suschenkova

Tamara Suschenkova, born in 1928, in Starodub, Bryansk oblast, Russia, explains her living situation before the war broke out; father trained horses, while mother worked in a factory; after a series of conflicts and the drafting during the start of WWII, she never heard from her father again; father had gone missing in action; many of her neighbors had died during the war; recalls hearing stories of prisoner of war camps; grandmother went to a POW camp to try and find her son, Tamara's father; unable to find him, but saved another random man instead; Tamara had Jewish neighbors but cannot remember their names or anything; during the war, the neighbors were taken and placed into a large shed, until they were executed; didn't witness them being taken; did not realize where they were going or why they were being taken; it wasn't until she was told that Tamara realized the shock of the entire situation; recalls the atrocities that the Germans and police officers committed to the Jews; police officers would confiscate milk from Tamara's mother without any permission; when the Jewish neighbors were removed from their house, the police officers were given their house; recalls how her sisters saw two police officer took a Soviet soldier to the edge of the city to execute; Germans took away her entire street's homes, and then burned them all; recalls how she was almost shot by a German; lost her sisters and was frantically trying to find her; ran into an SS officer; SS officer assumed that she was a Jew and almost killed her; nearby girls and neighbors were able to notify Tamara's mother in time; mother ran out and convinces the officer not to harm any one of them; when they got home, mother spent some time explaining how to act when interacting with the Germans; even though the war was going on, Tamara still tried to find moments to enjoy life, but had already forgotten what it meant to laugh and be youthful; felt terrible for all of her Jewish classmates; recalls a young Jewish girl who had a beautiful voice; also was killed; men, women, and children were shot; was able to hear the gunshots and screams on the day of the execution, but not very audibly; explains the relationships of the Germans and Jews in her hometown; Jews had to wear a specific mark distinguishing them, but Tamara cannot remember what it was; says that by the end of the war, when her street was burned to the ground, her and her friends were no longer naïve to the war; explains the details of her and her neighbors being kicked out of their homes; an enormous amount of people; mother yelled at her and her sisters for running around; remembers seeing officers and soldiers standing on the sides of the road; walked by an array of German cars making their way down the road; women, children and elderly made up the constituency of those walking down this road; were not allowed to stop, those who stopped would be executed; women and men would often relieve themselves by squatting in the middle of the road; one night, they would spend the night in a swamp using moss as a comfortable space to lay in; another night, they would sleep in a old grain processing plant; on the third night, they didn't sleep, because the front was gaining on them; remembers seeing Russian jets fly over head; Russian pilots would wave at all of the people; those caught waving would have their hands shot through; the more they walked through the towns, the louder the Russian army became; recalls a time when in mid-walk, everybody stopped while the Germans entered into a strange formation; mother whispered to her that the Russians were approaching; remembers how her mother explained to her how to escape; there was a large ditch just up the road; once Tamara and her sisters made it there, they were to just run in one direction until their legs could take them no more; mother had taken the cow with her; the cow would meet Tamara and her sisters in the field they ran to; remembers her mother telling her to only leave the bushes when they heard Russian speech; even if a grenade went off, or if one of them was killed, they were not to leave the bushes; Tamara's mother was able to find her sisters; mother was eventually able to find the girls in the field; the Germans had already left by then; finally made it to Novoziubkov where the girls were welcomed with open arms; had a German woman give Tamara and her family her house while she was away with the German army; Ended up keeping the house; Both her house and her aunt's

house were small, so Tamara and her family ended up giving one house to passerby soldiers to refresh themselves, while the other home was for the family; Mother was returned to work; family was given pension from her father's work; Tamara's mother wanted to put Tamara to work and give her two younger sisters educations; Tamara was absolutely devastated, and her uncle convinced her mother to let her finish school; Tamara was enrolled in seventh grade and finished ten grades, until she contracted an inflammation of the bones; continued her education while in the hospital; also became a teacher, but only because she had no other choices; got two years of training; remembers receiving donations from the village people they were teaching; one of the students asked how she ended up becoming a teacher; Tamara broke out in tears and explained the hard road she had taken; remembers seeing Jews being taken to work, but had no idea that they were Jewish; heard from citizens that Jews were being hidden but cannot recall any details;