

My name is Dr. Henri Lustiger Thaler. We are here today with Chaya Small. This is a joint project by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Amud Aish Memorial Museum in Brooklyn-- and of course, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

Chaya, if you could give me the town that you were born in and the year that you were born in, and we'll begin there.

I was born in Poland in 1934 in a small town called Pohost. But my father wanted to register me in a bigger city. My grandfather was in Pinsk. And so as a child, I went to Pinsk, and I was registered May 20th 1934.

My father was a Rabbi in three towns-- Postav, Pohost, and Lukac. And it was in Lukac that the journey of our survival started-- by a Russian soldier who came to my father and said to him, rabbim, rabbim, run. My father had no intention of going with his family-- his wife, two children-- because we were at war with the Germans-- the most cultured, the most educated, the most sophisticated, the most intelligent nation. Why would we doubt anything about the German story they came at the end. We were secure and safe. The war would be over and we wanted to remain.

But the soldier kept saying, rabbim, run. So my father and his wife, my mother, myself the oldest, my sister Esther, and my brother who was a baby of several months, [INAUDIBLE] with my grandfather who was the rav in [Place name] He went to Vilna because there his father [INAUDIBLE] was the [INAUDIBLE] yeshiva. And he wanted to feel out the tempo of what was happening.

When he came to Vilna he realized that he couldn't do it himself, and he sent a message to my grandfather asking that his wife and his children should come and join him with his brother. My mother didn't want to leave. She was safe and secure at home with her family. And they say that her father said, [NON-ENGLISH], my child, my child, you have to go with your husband.

So during the night, and because my grandfather was beloved by all the people, he made arrangement with a balagula to take us out of [Place name] to get to Vilna, but we had to cross the border illegally. So the balagula came the first time. And my uncle Leib was in the [INAUDIBLE]-- we were about 14 or 15 people trying to cross the border. And we were caught. My uncle Leib jumped off the wagon. We never knew where he ended up until much later.

The other people went back to their homes. And my mother went back to her home. The second time we had the same situation but there was less people. Third time, my grandfather got one of his beloved Polish workers, and he volunteered to take my mother and the three children across the border. And it was at night with my sister, I, my grandfather and my brother had to crawl in the mud to get to the balagula's home in the middle of the night. A balagula is a man who drives a wagon-- horse and wagon open. It was winter-- bitter cold.

We went partway. We stopped at an inn-- or rather a farm. My mother had my brother wrapped up and covered. And she didn't want him to make a sound. And when she opened up the blanket there was no sound. So my mother was sure that he had died from suffocation. Actually, it was frost bite-- and somebody took snow and rubbed his hands-- rubbed his whole body till he revived.

Coming into the inn, my mother was all of maybe 21 or 22 years old at that time-- alone with three small children. And she was watching the farmer's son sharpening a knife. She wrapped us in a blanket and was whimpering, we're all going to be killed. Why did we have to make this journey? We'll all be killed.

But my father with my mother, went on-- went back on the wagon. And we are riding, and then it was day break. Now this is bitter cold winter-- everything was white. The snow was white. The trees white. The forest are covered. There's not a soul. And all of a sudden the sun comes out, and we see a glimmer of light. And the balagula takes his whip-- faster, faster, faster. And he was beating those two horses.

I see it. I feel it. I see the smoke as I tell you the story. I feel the tension. I feel the fear. I still feel the panic-- a young woman, three small children. And then they shoot to the right of us. And he's hitting those horses. And finally he pulled the reins of the horse and we stopped and we crossed the border.

And winter to me is the most beautiful season because winter to me is freedom-- escape, life, living. And when you go down in the winter and you see a little crocus coming up to the snow, you see life goes on. And it's a story I want to tell, not the story of horror. It's a story of life, living, and continuing living. Because this is our legacy that we have to leave for the future-- live, live, and appreciate every day.

Coming to Vilna-- you can stop me anytime-- coming to Vilna, we went to my uncle's house-- two little girls. And I don't remember exactly the temple that was going on. But I remember my aunt, a white tablecloth, beautiful house. We didn't have much-- my mother, my father, the three little children. And then through time we heard that somebody is giving visas to go to Curacao.

Now they're not talking about today when we go on the internet, and you want to see where Curacao is-- and two seconds later you see Google map and everything is there and the houses. We're talking about Polish shtetl rav with very little knowledge of what the rest of the world is like. And we're going to Curacao. What is Curacao? Can we live there? What kind of a life is it? How are we going to go to Curacao?

But through the grapevine, we were hearing stories that we did not believe-- because we wouldn't dare think that such atrocities were coming in. And my father said, we're going any way, and we're going to survive. Curacao was the ticket-- giving a master plan that only [INAUDIBLE] HaShem it could happen.

We have-- Finland allowed us to come in to-- no, [INAUDIBLE] allowed us to come to Curacao. And Russia allowed us to go all through her borders from Moscow to Vladivostok to take a boat to Japan to be there for three days and to go on to Curacao. Anybody in today's time would think this is crazy, this is insane. This is lunacy. But we had no choice. So we took that gamble.

Going to the vaksal in Vilna where we have papers to leave, my uncle had papers to leave also, but it was already-- Vilna at that time was already occupied by the Russians. So my uncle couldn't leave. But we were Polish so we were allowed to leave. And my father would say to my mother, why do we have to go through Russia? We're never going to get out of Siberia. You know Siberia is a death camp. We're never going to do it. But when you're caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, you don't mind.

We went on the train-- a two week trip, tight and squished, not enough food. And the one thing I remember so vividly, I was all of maybe six, and the train would make different stops so we could relieve ourselves. And I would get off the train, bitter cold in winter, and there is a Russian soldier with a bayonet watching me, a six year old girl. Where I'm going to run? Why does he have to compromise or embarrass me, and make me so uncomfortable. This is something that has always been a discomfort for me.

Coming to Vladivostok-- now again, I should go back and talk a little bit more about Sugihara, and I will do it now before I lose track. Sugihara was a diplomat in Vilna. He was there for three weeks before he was asked to leave, and we came to ask him for a visa. And he thought that well he would have to-- actually, [Personal name] was the one who found out about him.

And we came to ask him for one or two visas. He called the emperor to find out if he can do so. And the emperor said no. Three times he asked the emperor for permission to give visas, and three times he said no. At the end, he gave the visas anyway. And instead of giving three or four or five visas, records show over 1,000 if not 1,500. Because we got a visa-- one visa-- on that visa were five people.

So when my mother got the visa-- and she was on the train. It was handed to her. My father had it before. And after the two weeks we come to Vladivostok. We had a problem in Vladivostok again. We can't get on the boat. And there was an officer [Personal name] who wouldn't allow us to come on the boat because the emperor said no. But they also did the right thing. He and Sugihara were from the same school. When he was asked why did you do it he said, because my mother always taught me to do the right thing. And the right thing is to help. So they let us go on the boat and we came to Tsuraga.

I don't have to tell you how difficult the trip on the trans-Siberian railroad was-- jam packed with no facilities, with no food, with bitter cold. And then when we landed in Tsuraga, it was a beautiful day. And the Japanese have a custom where they welcomed visitors and strangers with tangerines. And they throw the tangerines into the waters, and the tangerines float to the boat. And we picked them up. We were hungry. We were thirsty. We weren't clean. We weren't dressed like nothing. And we went to take the tangerines. And I remember he said, don't touch those tangerines. It's poison. They're going to kill us before we get off the boat-- never touch those tangerines. But afterwards when people ate them and nothing happened, we had the tangerines also.

Coming to Japan-- and we only had a three day visa-- that's all it was-- coming to Japan, it was like coming to paradise-- the cleanliness, the manners, the beauty, the welcome-- not only from the Japanese, but welcome from the Jews that lived in Japan. And the housing that we had-- they provided for us a [INAUDIBLE] with a different lifestyle.

But then another party comes in Japan. And that is Abraham [Personal name] Now many things-- three, numbers in three-- that when I go over the story, three people who helped us-- [Personal name] Sugihara, [Personal name] of three days to stay in Japan-- three times the emperor telling Sugihara no you can't. And there was somebody Abraham [Personal name] who came from a home of priests. He was an educated man, and one day he came across a Talmud in a bookstore-- in an old bookstore, taught himself how to read Hebrew, studied the Talmud. And when he came to Japan, we didn't speak Japanese. The Japanese didn't speak Yiddish or Russian of Poland. How are we going to communicate with them?

Of course, Abraham [Personal name] was our interpreter. And he became a friend with the [INAUDIBLE]. And when it came time for us to leave, after three days, he borrowed money to bribe the officials so that we should be able to stay longer. And the three day visa turned out to be a one year stay.

My happiest moments of the war was my life in Japan. I went to school in Japan. I had friends in Japan. I learned the language of Japan. We felt love for Japan because the story has it with [Personal name] the financier who sponsored the Japanese War, was good to us. And we felt like highly honored guests.

When you say, Chaya, that you went to school in Japan, what kind of school was that? The Jewish--

Japanese.

Japanese.

Japanese school-- I spoke Japanese. I wrote Japanese. My friends and neighbors were across the street from me. I played with them. My father said I can eat there, rice only and nothing else. We would go out in the morning and stand by the ravine and do the exercises. And we all went to school together. I spoke Japanese. I wrote Japanese. And we lived right near the Japanese-- there was a park ahead of us-- on top of it that is still in existence today. And when I was doing research on my book we found the building and the park. And the temple was also there. And the songs I sang I taught my children.

Beautiful.

And so the customs, the cleanliness, the warmth-- that every room-- we had a room-- had a bath-- clean, clean, super clean. And above all, the respect of the Jewish brain. The respect that they had for what the Jews have done for them. That was foremost in their mind.

Did you have a chance-- I imagine you had a chance to see Abraham [Personal name] Abraham [Personal name] saw him physically correct? And parents must have spoken about him. People spoke about him-- that he was a good friend to the Jews. what do you know about him? Like whatever happened to him? Did you ever follow--

He was married. I'll tell you about him. He was married. He had two daughters-- Margaret just died recently-- said the papers. They never converted. He converted at the age of 60. He would come to my father often.

Let me go back a little bit. My father was in the older [INAUDIBLE]. He was a married man with children. Most married men with children from the Yeshiva world did not leave. They had [INAUDIBLE]. And I said, they were very comfortable knowing that the Germans will take good care of everyone concerned.

He gravitated-- he converted, that's why his name is Abraham. He converted, Rabbi [Personal name] is buried in Har Hamenuchot in Jerusalem. When a Japanese officials-- and he borrowed-- he died a pauper because he borrowed money from his brother-in-law, and he paid back every penny. So he had no money but we took care of him. One of the things that I wanted to bring out about our life in Japan and our life in Shanghai, was we were one for all. We all stuck together.

Last night a young girl, third generation, contacted me. You knew my father. We're all one big family-- extended family. So it was a little bit different for us because we came in as a group, as opposed to the Austrian Jews who came in as individuals. We had a life not as opulent as they had. And they couldn't adjust because the drop was so heavy. Our life was based on Torah. And whatever is meant to be, the faith that we had in God is his will. So the mentality behind it was miles apart.

In 1941, when Japan and Germany became allies, the Germans wanted all the Jews to be put in a boat, taken out to the sea, and sink the boat. The Japanese did not want to do it. [INAUDIBLE] gratefulness for what you did before. Instead they sent us to Shanghai, which was under Japanese law.

Coming into Shanghai-- because my father was a very esteemed rabbi, my grandfather was a very, very esteemed rabbi in Pinsk-- we had very good housing. The housing that we had in the ghetto, in the slum, in the filth, in the debauchery of the ghetto, we had a home. My home consisted of one room. I slept on the floor. I don't remember ever sleeping in a bed.

And the house was the social center for all who wanted and needed. I see pictures that I have with the sofa and all the young boys gathering around in our home, around my father and mother. Looking at the ages, they were 18, 19, 20. And at that age they were already all orphans-- not knowing that they were orphans. And the surrogate father and the surrogate mother was Rabbi Walkin-- Rabbi [INAUDIBLE] Walkin.

And when they got married, my parents were the [INAUDIBLE]. This with their family. Because when the war was over, they realized there's no one there. I remember my father making a beautiful home. We didn't have much. I mean, we had-- oh, I'll get back to that. I'll tell you a little bit about it more in detail.

Shabbat was Shabbat And we scrounge for the Shabbat to be the way it should be-- fish and chicken. But we had one chicken between two families. We were five, neighbors were six-- so you're talking 11 people-- one chicken for one week, not very much. Fish was cheaper. Vegetables you couldn't touch because the filth. You were afraid to eat it. Everything had to be boiled and boiled. If you drank any water you would end up with dysentery. So it wasn't worth it.

In the ghetto the hardest hit were the Austrian Jews because when they came, they came with money. They lived in either French town or settlement-- a settlement was under the rule of the British, French town with the French. And they were in business. For them life went on. We had, even the ghetto-- and it's war time remember-- we had publishing houses. We had music. We had theater. We had restaurants. It was a town more or less normal.

Like when I talk about it being a normal life, we didn't have numbers. We didn't have guns shooting in the middle of the night. We didn't have the marches. We were poor and hungry and no clothes and no heat and no water and no facilities. But life went on. I went to school. I went to the Shanghai Jewish school from the Kadoories. And then we built a beis yaakov in the ghetto, And also the Kadoorie school.

My education was-- at 12 when I came to America-- they put me into high school. The Kadoorie, the Sassoons, and Hardoon-- the three wealthy people supported the community. And then when came in Shanghai the time where the stateless people had to go into the ghetto, Kadoorie built a school in the ghetto.

As a child through my eyes, I thought life was normal. This is what had to be, and we didn't question. I knew for one

yontif that I would get a pair of shoes. For another yontif there would be a dress. We went to school. We washed the dress every night and put on clean clothes-- one maybe two. We would borrow. You made a wedding, you would borrow.

I knew my mother and father always set the table-- have to have a table clothe, have to have flowers. It has to be nice. The little meagerest thing that we had were shared with all. I'm in Shanghai now, right.

I'm just a-- I have just a question. I just wonder how that impressed you as a young girl? Because there was really a diversity of Jewish groups. You had the Sephardic Jews, who were very small number-- 500. But of course these families that you mentioned Kadoorie and Sassoons-- and then you had the Russian community. Do you remember what the interaction was with the Russian community? What was the interaction?

Let me tell you what happened there to the best of my recollection.

Sure, of course.

In Harbin, when things were getting bad, they left Harbin, who was-- in 1935-- left Harbin to come to Shanghai. Rabbi Ashkenazi, who was [INAUDIBLE] rabbi, came to Shanghai because Harbin was bad. So we also had the Sephardic Jews-- the wealthy. They were there too.

Now here again the welcome that we had from the Sephardic community was better learned people are coming. You have the learned Torah loving community. So they embraced us. We were the crown jewels for them. Nice story told-- and again, you see the hand of God in it-- is the story of Hardoon.

Now you had to Sassoon was in real estate. Kadoorie was in real estate. And they needed more work. So they hired in Baghdad Hardoon to come and work as a young man-- who ended up being the wealthiest of all. And he had dream that his father came to him and said, you know, Sassoon built a beautiful [INAUDIBLE] for his mother, Kadoorie built a beautiful shul, and you don't even have anything for me. So being the kind of different person-- out of the box person you would call today-- Hardoon built a 225 seat synagogue by the ghetto.

Of course it was empty for 10 years. Nobody used it. It was a magnificent mansion. And when the [INAUDIBLE] yeshiva came to Shanghai and there was no housing, we opened up the shul, and the shul had exactly 225 seats for their 225 students. So that [INAUDIBLE]-- the [INAUDIBLE]-- she was Sephardi. She came with the [INAUDIBLE] family. Because of all of a sudden there's a wealth of Yeshiva like this coming in. And they embraced us. They didn't know what to do about it. We went to their homes.

We were like creme de la creme. As much as they liked theater and music and the art, that was mundane. The Torah coming in was such an extent-- and zealots. They loved that. So we couldn't leave the ghetto. There was no way we could leave because goyim wouldn't allow. If you worked, you were able to leave and the papers would come back and forth. And you have a permit. I had to see a doctor. I got a permit for one day.

But life was-- before '43, before you went into the ghetto-- but prior to that, life was better before the ghettoisation.

For the German Jews. Because they lived in French town settlement. Nobody lived in the ghetto. The ghetto was deplorable. You get up every morning, the cars would come. There was no facilities. So that the jelly pots would be out. They would pick up the waste-- human waste-- in one wagon, and the second wagon, human bodies.

So I saw that every day. To see dead people on the street, was nothing to see that. Life was cheap. The coolies-- no shoes running-- coolies running rickshaws with no shoes, no clothes, and [INAUDIBLE] on them. In hindsight, you think about it-- and then when you went to French town, the buildings, the wealth, was unbelievable. Now we had an ama. An ama is a maid. A young girl from the country, she worked for my mother. She kept our house clean. She did our laundry. She took care of us. She didn't get paid-- there was no money to pay her. But she had got a meal. And she was very happy to have a meal.

We also had an uma. An uma was German widow. She took care of my little brother. Her pay was a meal. I think my father and mother did it more [INAUDIBLE] than actual payment-- so devoted to us. We couldn't take the ama out, but we did take the uma out. I've never forgotten that. They had food.

At a later time, we had a soup kitchen by the community. And my father also, with that Ashkenazi had a soup kitchen. And so at least once a day you knew you would have a meal. What I'm thinking about, life in Shanghai, we all worked with each other and [INAUDIBLE] for each other. We had it a little bit better than the German Jews, because we had a contact in America. And in America was Ezra Stoler and Rabbi [Personal name] turned out a relative of ours, we didn't know-- and Rabbi [Personal name]. You had the who's who of the Torah world.