

B. RIBS, recorded 19 August, 1981

Boris Davidovich Ribs, b. 10 July 1925 in Riga, Latvia. Father, David, was a timber merchant. Mother [no name given] did not work. Boris had an older and a younger brother [no names given]. Family was relatively well off. Boris was educated before the Russian Revolution; spoke Hebrew. He felt discrimination and there was a quota of Jews in Latvian universities [he says 5%; I have not verified this], but Boris says there were opportunities for Jews in business and in the professions. In 1929 his grandparents [no names given] emigrated to Palestine. There were many Jewish communists in Latvia, and some went to the USSR to study. In 1940, when the USSR incorporated Latvia, Jewish schools were closed and national consciousness was suppressed.

Boris was in gymnasium when the war began. On 25 June, roundups of Jews began. On 3 July 1941, the Germans occupied Riga. Many Jews had failed to evacuate even though Riga Jews had known about anti-Semitism in Germany and had seen German Jewish refugees. Arrests of Jews in Riga began on 3 July. Jews were sent to the Central Prison and then shot, including some of Boris's relatives (two cousins, an aunt and an uncle). Ribs says that some of the first "actions" after the German invasion were carried out by Latvians without German orders. [Not clear how Ribs would have been privy to German orders.] Some Jews were sent to a synagogue and burned, others were beaten in the cemetery.

David Ribs tried to evacuate the family from Riga, but Latvians shot at Jews who were trying to leave, so they returned to Riga. (Boris's future wife [no name given] was evacuated to the USSR and ended up in Kazakhstan.) Then, mother, father, Boris and his younger brother went to their house in the country; Boris's older brother was sent to work in the nearby peat bogs.

On 25 October 1941 the family was ordered to move to the ghetto, located in Riga's poorest neighborhood. Boris worked in the stockyards. He describes life in the ghetto, food rationing and hunger; but he also sang songs about the ghetto and played football. Jewish families from Germany arrived in the Riga ghetto. One of the ghetto guards, who had been Boris's teacher in gymnasium, gave Boris food. [Rudolf] Lange was the head of Jewish affairs in Riga. [Kurt] Krause was commandant of the ghetto and shot Jews who took extra food. [Max] Haar was head of the German police and served under Krause; Boris says he was later killed by Jews.

Boris began to work as a servant at Wehrmacht headquarters in Riga. In 1942, his father became a building superintendent. He described a Gestapo search for weapons in the cellar of one of the buildings. Some Jews were accused of participating in the resistance and were executed. Two escaped the search: Damsky hid but was then caught and executed; Sy Izraelovich escaped.

Boris says that they heard bits and pieces about the war and saw German newspapers. He claims that the Belorussians were the most anti-Nazi of all the Soviet nationalities; the Latvians, on the other hand, were in the Gestapo and SS. Boris heard about the concentration camps, but in Riga Jews were killed on the spot. He notes the death of two Jews by name – a Dr. Finkelstein and a Dr. Mintz.

In November 1941 the order was given for men, women and children to move to separate camps; the old, sick and infirm were shot. Boris learned of this later when Jewish possessions, documents and names and addresses appeared at the market. Ribs says that people understood only gradually the nature of the massive destruction that had befallen them.

The Riga ghetto was liquidated in 1943. In July 1943 Boris was sent to the Kaiserwald concentration camp, near the village of Mežaparks, outside Riga. He describes life in the camp and the various categories of prisoners, identified by the color of the triangles on their uniforms (red, green, black). Many of the inmates were German criminals, deserters, and Poles. The commander was a Major Zolle (?), assisted by Zimmerman (?). Boris became a carpenter and built and repaired barracks occupied by Jews. One J. Meshchinskii, a civil engineer now in the U.S., led a group of Jewish workers. Kagan (now in the U.S.) was the Jewish leader in the camp.

Ribs says that the Poles tormented the Jews worse than did the Germans. Poles complained about Jews at the baths and beat Jews as they were going to and from their barracks; they beat to death Boris's drawing teacher.

There were about 100 men, 100 women, and a few children in the concentration camp, though the Gestapo eventually shot the latter.

In July 1944, the Germans started to evacuate Kaiserwald. Boris's father was shot. Boris was sent to another concentration camp near Danzig [not identified but probably Stutthof]. It had a crematorium; bodies were also burned on wooden pyres. The weak, sick and "apathetic," called "Muslims," were executed. One gruesome method was to force Jews to wear wet clothing at reveille, in December. The old and weak could not survive. In January a death march began, and the prisoners were evacuated along the Polish corridor to another concentration camp, where typhus and dysentery raged. Then they were abandoned.

All this time, Boris was with his brother, but his parents had perished. Boris joined the Soviet army and made it to Berlin. After the war, he returned to Riga. Boris lost 40 relatives in Riga; only 4-5 survived.

In response to the interviewer's question, Boris reflects on the lessons of his experiences. Before the war, many Jews were reluctant to leave because of their possessions; therefore, possessions are not important. (As the saying goes, Boris says, "The Jews are always late for the last train.") Contrary to German propaganda, Jews did not prey on each other; rather, they helped each other. Boris is now in Israel so that his children would not experience a ghetto or a concentration camp.

Summary by: Joseph Bradley