

It is Sunday, October 12, 1980. And this is Stanley Bursch speaking at the home of Irving Lebow. The purpose of this tape recording is to preserve for the records of Temple Shalom of Wheeling, West Virginia, the experiences of one of its congregants during the Holocaust that so affected the Jewish people and their history in a manner comparable perhaps only to the exodus and the rebirth of the modern state of Israel.

Here's what I think, I can't go right how it started, you know? I think I should go a little ahead. You know.

Well, let's go back. Where were you living?

Yeah, in Riga. You know. I can't start with my childhood, but that would be so long. And--

What did your father do for a living?

My father was a leather worker. He made saddles, saddles for-- riding saddles.

What was his name?

Leibowitz.

How many children in your family?

We were six children, five boys and one girl.

Did you live in a home comparable to this, one that we're talking about on Miller Street in Wheeling in '62?

No, no, no. We lived in a shtetl, you know, in a shtetl. You know what, in a small town. And it was a, I would say, a ghetto, a little town. All the homes were made out of log cabins because it was-- our country is an agricultural country. And there were plenty of woods and logs. Not only that, in my time, there weren't sawmills who could cut and form the logs.

But some of the log homes were quite big and comfortable too. And outside, they fixed it up with finishing boards, you know, what they still get it, and which was expensive. And inside was with-- how do you call it-- with caulk, with like cement, you know, smoothing the walls. Some of the homes were nice, but they were log cabins. And they were good because it was a cold climate, and it's good insulation. You know, log. So this.

But if I would tell you all the details, you know, I remember from my childhood, from my early childhood and then--

You erased some.

You're erasing.

You're erasing.

OK. When I remember how I made my first steps or even before, I can't. I said I'm imagining, you know. And I remember when I--

Maybe we could disconnect [INAUDIBLE].

Yeah. And so-- but here lately, you know how it came and I said, the father is right because there are such children, who are working with the well brains, who can't remember. I remember a lot. I remember how I was weaned. I remember how my mother used to diaper me and this. But let's not go into this.

It was primarily an all-Jewish community.

Yeah. All-Jewish community-- in fact, the mayor was a Jewish man. And the post office was government. So the mail carrier spoke Jewish like any Jew. You couldn't distinguish. And a few non-Jews who lived around the city, they spoke Jewish like Jews. They grew up with the Jews.

What was the name of the city?

Varaklani. Varaklani. It was there used to be a song Varaklani is nine [NON-ENGLISH] from a bahn. A bahn is a railroad. We were about nine miles away from the railroad. And here, 9 miles by car is nothing to-- it is a home, you know. But there there weren't any cars. The first time I saw a car was when I was 14 years old.

So at the railroad-- I didn't see a railroad when I was about that age. A railroad, a steam engine I didn't see when I was about that age. So when we lived there, like it was little Israel. And there were about three synagogues. And it so happened that one synagogue, which was called the Green Beis Medrash because it was painted green, was across from my house. And when I was a toddler, or three or four years old, we kids used to play in that synagogue because there were no playgrounds from around the kids. And that synagogue was open all day.

And that, the bima, what you used to read the scrolls, was in the middle, fenced in and elevated. And we used to run there and play.

Were you being trained as a leatherer by your father?

No. No. No. I started-- and here again, in the shul being near the synagogue. And in the synagogue, there used to be-- the people used to study, the old people with gray beard. And I would always sit and listen. And then my father passed away when I was about five and a half or six years old. And I had a brother. And he was-- when I was about five, he was 15 years old.

And he started to go to the Lubavitch yeshiva in those days. And my father, before-- my mother used to tell me how my father would say now I'm working for to support this student in the yeshiva. And when my father died, he came home when I was about four and a half years old, four and a half or five.

That was considered an honor, wasn't it, to support a student?

Right. Right. For him, yeah. So he start teaching me pre-school, the alphabet, the Hebrew. And I was a kid, and I learned to read. And today kids, from television they went there. Three years old, they read. Some kids are now reading at four years old and five. They go to libraries already. In the olden days, it wasn't like that.

So as a kid, a admired kid, and the old men used to come when I was come in shul, open the Chumash and say, come and read. And I would read, and they all open eyes. So this is my youth, went up like that. When I was about-- yeah, when I was about six or seven years old, six years old to be correct, my brother-- again, I didn't have a father. My mother was a housewife and at home. So my brother took over the responsibility of raising me.

He took over me to school, and it was a public school, all the Jewish-- Jewish, all teachers, all kids. There were no Christian. A non-Jewish kid couldn't go in because it was all in Yiddish. He took me over, and he mentioned to the teacher, you know. And there you prescribed-- not prescribed-- brought the child to school, registered.

You registered, had to register the child. So my brother, oh, he can read already. So the teacher takes out a book, and I read it. Oh, she said, oh, he can go in second grade, and I was six years old. Why, second grader were already eight years old because school started, in those days, and seven years. And then I felt already, as young as I was, quite proud on this.

And before we left the school, the teacher calls back. She said, oh, maybe not. He'll-- maybe he should start in first grade with all the kids.

The school was in Yiddish, you said.

In Yiddish, all in Yiddish.

Not Hebrew, but Yiddish.

Not Hebrew, now, not-- Yiddish.

Did you have Yiddish newspapers?

Yeah. It used to come from Riga, but very few people prescribed the Jewish paper. It used to go-- a paper used to go from end to end. I want to tell you that the living standard was so low there because every penny counted there. People didn't subscribe to a paper because it was costing, let's say, like here a paper \$0.15 or \$0.25. And it was only in the capital, Riga, came out a Jewish paper. Frimorgn. It was called Frimorgn.

Was there a large Jewish population in Riga?

In Latvia-- yeah, in Riga were about 40,000 people.

How many in the village where you lived?

About 2,500.

When was the first time that you sort of got the feeling something was wrong in Europe?

Oh, then we have to jump. The difference between Jews and non-Jew I felt very early already, probably as soon as I started to understand-- 10 years old.

How did you-- how did you understand that if you were living with all Jewish people?

Well, listening, listening what they say. And then farmers, Christian farmers used to come in town. In town was a market place, and there they used to sell-- the shtetl, you know, we needed wood. Burning wood, that was our fuel to heat our homes and to-- hay for our cow. Each one had a cow, or two families had a cow. Hay and wood and chickens-- I don't know why they didn't raise chickens-- and eggs we had to buy from farmers.

Then, like peas and beans and this, from farmers, you know. It was in stores too, and it was back like here. It was. But people were-- potatoes-- also, we all had gardens. But for potatoes it wasn't big enough. So goyim used to come. Not only the-- Jewish people used to have a horse and buggy, go out in the surrounding places and buy and bring, or fish. There were fishers. There weren't Jewish fishers. But Jews-- there was a fish market or store.

And we, as I said before, we lived-- we supported each other, but it was small. For example, there was a store, herring only, herring and make-- people ate a lot of herring. Or there were a stand from sunflower seeds, and these-- very poor.

A hardware store, it wasn't like here. We had iron, you know, what a farmer need to fix this is wagon or sled. Then was a Jewish blacksmith, who was horseshoeing horses or building for farmers-- cobblers, tailors, storekeepers. And the town was built and it had two churches, I think one Catholic. And I was too young to remember if the other, I think, was probably a Protestant church.

And then between the churches was a big free place, and there used to be a market Friday. And the farmers used to bring all their produce, berries and this. And the Jewish people would buy and sell on that.

When did I feel the difference between Jew and non-Jew? Hearing the conversation, and then we Jewish kids had to go out swimming. There was a little creek about a mile away. We had to go through farmer's territory. Sometimes farmer's boy would let their dogs on us or sometimes they would throw stones. And still, we knew it, that it was a different, a

different feeling between Jews and non-Jews.

Not only that, when I was older I felt that we are like guests in their place. They made us feel that everything that we live, we live-- the store what we have, the goy would like to have it, the Latvians, because they considered nationalist. Latvia, it was their country, and we are like strangers. All the time it was a feeling.

How long did your family live in Latvia?

In Latvia, we lived until the Second World War.

No, I mean before--

In that little town?

Yeah, I mean before.

Before I started going to school, about when I was about 16 years old.

OK. No, what I'm interested in, how long did your father and grandfather and his father, how long had they been living in Latvia?

Oh, oh, oh, In Latvia? As far as I know, my grandfather lived in Latvia.

So at least three generations.

Three generations, right. Right. And I think, if I would tell you details, again it would take-- I can tell you from six and seven and eight and 10 and 15 years old.

You began to feel the difference in the--

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. However, we were so used to it, it didn't bother us. Somehow, we knew that they don't love us. We knew we are like a second-class citizens. But we were built in our hearts that we are as good as or better as they are. In fact, we used to call them, as little boys-- I didn't know the Latvian language, but one thing we would know, to call the Christian boys pig-- pig shepherds.

That was our-- when they did something to us, we used to run away and say "pig shepherd" or something to downgrade them. And so--

How did you deal with the farmers and the Christians at the market if you didn't know the Latvian language?

Well, I was little. Our parents knew somewhat.

I see. But Yiddish was generally the language spoken.

Only Yiddish. Only Yiddish. And Hebrew, what we learned is from the Bible. But we used to translate. We started on the Genesis. Each word we used to translate. In fact, you'll find in the Sholem Aleichem's books, he describes how a student, when he started cheder, it wasn't a shul. We had the shul and the cheder. That Hebrew we learned with a rabbi. And each word-- [HEBREW], in the beginning, [HEBREW] created, Elohim, God, and so on. So that was all.

However, after-- oh, yeah, when we got older, in our school, about when we got in the fourth, fifth grade, we had to learn Latvian. It was by the government. You have to learn the country's language.

Then we were Russian because Russia were on our border, and so there lived a lot of Russians. In fact, 12% of the population were Russian. And Germans were on our other border. And then Latvia was ruled by Germany before 1918,

before the First World War. So a lot in the big cities, not in our shtetl, spoke German.

So in the fifth, sixth, seventh grade, we used to get always new languages. And Latvian, for example, we had an hour every day. Russian we had two or three times a week, and so with German. But in school, what we learned the language was not enough, the same as in America. In America, you start the foreign language in high school, French or Spanish. If they don't practice it, after two or three years it's forgotten or half forgotten. So that was with us too.

However, here what happened. When I was about 15 years old, the same brother who was teaching me, I mentioned in the beginning, he left for Israel when he was about 18 years old, as a halutz. And in about seven or eight, he came for a visit. And at that time, I have graduated from public school.

By the way, I was a first-grade student. But in my days, where we knew-- the Jewish people themselves knew we have a Jewish problem. We are-- we are overpopulated by ourselves. The government doesn't absorb us. There was not a Jewish person, man or woman, employed by the government in a office or the railroad. The railroad belonged to the government, or post office belonged to the government, or telephone, which telephone didn't employ much in those days. But like here, you get government jobs. No.

And at that time, actually, it was after the Balfour Declaration that England promised Israel to be a homeland. And not only that, before that even we knew we have to do something because our youth already didn't have what to do. And in a store in the small town, it wasn't enough for the father or mother to attend.

So there were Zionism. In fact, in school, our teacher already was-- our principal, he was a Bundist. He was a leftie. And here what it was. There were two groups how to solve the Jewish problem. One said we should go and build Israel and be a nation like any nation. And others, and here in shul our principal was like that-- he said, the Jewish problem can't be solved with Israel. Israel is too small and so on and so forth. Socialism-- have to fight so that we should be accepted and all minorities should be accepted and be able to live with the goyim and be equal citizens.

It appealed, you know. So a lot of the kids, we understood already it. Was lectured every day because it was a very, very acute question. So my family were Zionist. As I said, my older brother, who was 18 years old, went to Israel as a halutzim. I had two more brothers. They went to Israel too.

What were their names?

Named Morris and Louie.

Are they still in Israel?

No, no, no. They are all dead. They lived in Israel in the very hard times, and they came to America. But they died. See, I was the youngest. If they would be alive, they would be already probably 85, 90 years old. So these are-- my brother went to Israel. And he stayed there probably-- he went in '21, and he came for a visit at the time when I graduated.

And here what it was. In those days, Jews too used to go to yeshivas and study, and study, and there was a-- not to go to school anymore. Work is important, doing with your hands. And they would say, that's why we are hated, because we are-- we never do hard work. And the goyim used to think so too.

So we were-- I was so saturated with that that I didn't-- oh, yeah, and before graduating, this same principal gave us to write a theme, what I'm going to do after school. And I told him I'm going to learn a trade. So with me he was saying that-- no education, but with me, he came to my mother and said, no, I should learn farther. I should learn. I should keep on studying.

However, my brother came. And in Israel was too, he said, we need by hand-- with hand to work because, he said, we have doctors who dig ditches and who work in [NON-ENGLISH]. And we have too many and other production of educated people.

So it was decided that I should go to a trade school. And sure enough-- I didn't have my opinion because, living in the town-- and a lot of even kids who live in big cities, you don't know what you want. So I listened to my brother. And they took me to Riga, and I went to a trade school at daytime. And then I went to a high school in the evenings.

And a lot of people couldn't understand how I can manage it. The trade school was from 8:00 till 4:00 or 5:00. And evening school was from 7:00 to 11:00, the high school. And the high school was a Latvian already, in Riga. And there I had-- for the first time, I had a hard time with the Latvian language because what I learned in school wasn't enough. However, I managed it, and I graduated about the same time, high school in evening school and a trade school at daytime.

What trade were you being taught?

Electrical-- electricity, wiring, winding armatures, transformers. And in fact, after I graduated I worked in a radio plant. And I had another brother, which was only about five years older than I am, who he was already in Riga and working in a store. In fact, when I graduated, I worked in the same place. It was a radio and photo store. And they started to manufacture radios.

In those days, radios weren't like today. It was the crystal detectors, you call. It isn't for your time. There were no tubes. With a crystal, with a wire, you know, you touched. And anyhow, and this store developed very greatly because they were started from the beginning and were growing with the technology.

And we used to import all our technology from Germany and England. And our country, and it was a agricultural, we exported butter and bacon and lumber. And we lived pretty good.

And now we'll jump. So I graduated, and I got a job, and I was quite successful in my job. And then came the time when we had the conscription to the army. I had to go. Everybody had to go to the army. And I went away for two years to the army.

How old were you?

I was then about 20 years old. So for two years I went to the army. This was about in 1938.

Was there any-- what were you? What was your job in the army?

In the army? Well, we had-- I was in the infantry. And in our army, in comparison what I hear here, it was-- here is like you live in a hotel. We had basic training all the time.

For two years?

For two years, yeah. It happened to be I was in a bicycle regiment in the summertime and a ski regiment in wintertime. We were two Jewish boys in the whole business.

Were there any Jewish officers.

No. No. No. There was one Jewish policeman in Riga, and that's all-- no officers. No. In fact-- and there too, we were so discriminated but, as I said, we were used to it. For example, any Latvian who went to high school, after three months used to get a-- it's called a strip that he was already-- next to a soldier, what is that in the army?

Maybe a private or--

Private, something like that, automatically. Not the Jewish, you know. After 24 months, we didn't get it. And one, we had a lawyer and this-- nothing, you know. But we were used to it. As I said, in our hearts we thought we are as good as or better. In fact, we thought we are better.

So after--

Did anybody complain or say any--

No. No. No. There it was not because it would not help. And we didn't want to rock the boat. No, there wasn't such a thing as complaining. Oh, yeah, and our system was a democratic. We had representatives in the-- and it's called the Sejm, you know. The representatives in the government-- elected.

And in fact, one was a very influential man. And his name is Dubina, and he was known all over Europe. He was with a beard and a rabbi. There was another, a rabbi representative, Nurock. He was then in Israel, in the Knesset. Nurock was a-- very old-timers probably would remember him. He was such an influential man, when the Russians came in they arrested him and he never came back. Well, Nurock was arrested too, but he survived and then went to Israel.

There is a lot of things what I will tell you. We might go back later on because otherwise it would be days. We'll see. We might even write a book. You and your wife can take it over. You'll see, it will be interesting episodes. But this is, since you need it for the children, so we'll go now again.

After, when I finished the army, it was 1938. You see, in '33, Hitler was-- has taken over. And before [AUDIO OUT]

That would be a good chapter. We will start how the Russians came into our country and then how the war started and how the Germans acted. The war, in general, started-- this date I remember. Later dates I don't. In September--