

1939, and the Germans attacked Poland and England and France then. He had a non-aggression pact with Poland, and they came to their aid. And the Germans had a very good success. You know, they conquered Poland within two weeks. And right away they went to Belgium and Holland and-- and they finished them up within days, and then France. And France, we were reading the papers, and, of course, a lot of it we thought that the war is on, but they don't mean us because we were a little on the side. And the situation were pretty good. The economic situation was pretty good.

And the fact that refugees came in Riga to save themselves, we thought that this is our-- we are at a haven. You know, Riga is a haven for the, in those days, war situation.

Where were the refugees coming from?

From Germany.

What kind of people were they?

Mostly Jewish people and a few non-Jews-- intellectuals, which were known as Democrats or that they are not Hitler sympathizers. And the war was-- we, naturally we were sad with the German successes, but we didn't feel the danger yet. And then in 1940, while the war was on for about a year, the Russians came in.

Where were you working at that time? At that time I was working in a radio plant. It was called Radio Pioneer. And I was getting good wages. And since I graduated from that trade school, I was considered a good tradesman. I was not in the trade. And I was born there. And I thought it is the homeland and we were safe.

Of course, I was always a Zionist. Even my nickname as a child was "the Zionist" because I used to sing all the Zionist songs. And in those days till--

Were your brothers still in Israel at that-- or Palestine at that time?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Then in 1940, the Russians came in. And they came in suddenly. We didn't even have the notion that they are coming. And only the night before we heard, and then those heavy propeller plane bombers or whatever they had, the airplanes. And they occupied the airport. And there was no resistance. We didn't even hear.

And the next day, there was in the papers that since the Russians on over the radio. They had occupied the radio station. It was overnight. We all slept. That since the war is going gone, and Latvia is a neighbor and bordering with a sea, they cannot let their interest, the Latvia, to go over to guard the Russian interests by Latvia until they have to move in. And things will be the same.

And the president was still the president. And in fact, he came on the radio and said everybody should go to work and not to worry. And he said, you go to your work, and I'll do my work. [PAUSES] However, in a very short time-- not to go in details-- the president was unseated. In fact, he was taken to Russia. And a high official, that Vyshinsky, he was the attorney general of Russia. But he was a very good speaker.

And he came in the factories, organized the factories. And we had to go all to the square of Riga and demand that Latvia should become a Soviet Republic. And we demonstrated. It was all organized in the factories. And one day came. They were full of people, the biggest amount of people I have ever seen before. And we prepared the placards and signs. And the next day, or in a couple of days, it was in the paper that the petition was accepted, and Latvia now is not anymore Latvia as a Republic, that it's a Soviet Socialist Republic.

And they had already a representative in the [RUSSIAN], that highest-- soyuz of the Russian in Moscow. And it was a Soviet satellite. And then, our papers were full already with a Soviet line. And they praised Stalin, how clever and how foresighted he was that he made a pact with Hitler. And he said already, the capitalist Nations wanted that Russia should fight-- to get in a fight, Russia and Germany, but Stalin outsmarted them. And now the capitalist countries are fighting Germany. Russia is completely peaceful.

And we lived like that for about 11 months.

Where was your mother, living still with--

My mother was living with us in Riga. From the small town, the shtetl. We brought her to Riga because myself and another brother and my sister were working in Riga. They were working, and I, in the beginning, I was getting my education in Riga. I was up, by that time, 20 years old.

So none of your family was left in the shtetl then, is that right?

No. No. So we lived under the Russians for about 11 month. And the press was full of praises. And we did not have a notion that they'll attack us. However, once in a while, we used to listen on sort waves England. And we, especially the Jewish people, we were alert what's going on. And we read between the lines because, from the press and from the radio, you didn't get a good picture because everything was nice, everything for Russia was nice. And they were-- still they were putting the guilt on the capitalists. And they wanted the war, and America, it was still the same, the Cold War, the same language.

So again, as a surprise, the next day we read that the Germans are marching on Russia. And I want to tell you that we heard over the radio, we-- in fact, because I was working in a radio plant, and we had that shortwave, it wasn't so common like today, everybody can with the radio. Before, you could hear the station and that's all.

So we heard that Churchill was warning Russia that the Germans are concentrating their divisions on the border with Russia.

Where were all these refugees living? How did they--

They lived among the people. They were-- they rent out in the old countries like that. Here for example, we have a house with so many rooms and some empty rooms. There, if a family had some empty rooms, they had borders.

I see.

So they lived in homes where there is one or two rooms. And mostly-- not family members came-- mostly were couples or single people came-- adults. So one morning, we hear that really the Germans are attacking the Russian. And they said already before, they were praising Germany, and not a bad word. And they call them all kind of names. But they said our forces are vigil, and they are giving them resistance.

And they said everybody should go to work on this. However, in a few days, in a few days, we could see, when we were going to work, that the Germans, instead of going towards the front to meet-- the Russians, instead of going towards the front to meet the Germans, they were going back. So, on the radio-- television we didn't have yet. On the radio, they would say that the Russians are changing out their regular army with fresh forces, more who know how to operate more modern weapons.

But we did see this all back. And it wasn't-- then they-- a few nights, the Germans bombarded Riga. And then Hitler called back the Volksdeutsche, you know, the German people who lived in Riga. In Riga, in Latvia, there were about 6% Germans because it's a neighboring country. He called back all the people to come back to Germany.

And they grew up in Latvia and knew the language. So he dropped them as parachutists at night in Riga. They knew the town. And already, they went on the roofs, the Germans, the fifth column they were. And the Russians were paralyzed. And still they were saying that they were pushing them back and having victories.

Not only that, they started to mobilize the soldiers, the Latvians. We were considered already Latvian to Russian. So they gave out all the names who were serving in the army from this and this years should report. So some reported, and some did not.

Were you given a number to report?

Right. Yeah. By alphabet-- and everybody had to report, who did service, let's say, from '37 to the end. And so what happened, they mobilized those, the Latvians, and they put them to guard the retreat. And their own soldiers, some cavalry and their guns, they were pulling back. But the Germans came so fast, they blocked them up, they got--

Did you go when you were called?

No, it wasn't my number yet.

I see.

I wasn't. And then we saw that things are bad. However, the Russians were broadcasting still good [INAUDIBLE].

Were you still working in the factory?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And the factory was accessible. So-- oh, yeah. And we were already intimidated. For example, if I saw that it is the opposite what they are doing and what they are saying, you could not tell. Unless it's your closest friend, you could not tell. They are not attacking, they are retreating. So in a few days, maybe a week, the Germans came in.

Where were you the first time you saw a German?

I was at home already. And all I could see is from the window, you know. And the radio right away changed it with the marches. And the Germans took over the radio station. And beside the march music, they said kill the Jews, you know, nothing else but the Jews. And the Jews made the war. And you know, it was already so-- I saw that we are trapped.

Why didn't escape? Why didn't run like a lot of Jewish people run, to Russia. And Hitler [INAUDIBLE]. I'll come to it. And it was very sad. And there was already shooting, you know. They were extra to live. They shot a Jew here and there, you know, on the street, lying there. It was-- for Jews it was--

However, the Latvians were jubilant. They went with them right away. And right away they had volunteers with the armbands, with German signs. And I saw them through the window. I lived on the fourth-- first-- fourth floor, and I could see how the Germans were marching in.

Was your mother still with you?

No. No. My mother was already dead. I had-- my brother was with me and a sister, a married sister with two infants. But I was alone when he was there. When the Germans started to bombard Riga, my sister were with two kids, and we lived on the fourth floor. You had to run. And that was already still-- the Russian power was, and they said everybody must run in the shelter.

And every other house, or third got a cement shelter in the basement, where you could run. And we did [INAUDIBLE] families. And then you wake them up, and you cry. So my brother and I and her husband was still from a shtetl near us. And her husband, we decide like that. We knew our shtetl was far from a train or from a strategic road or so.

And the First World War in our shtetl, there was fighting, but we hardly felt it. So we thought they should go back. And we had a house. They should go back and spend the time of the war in shtetl. And in that days, trains were still going. But the trains were going from Riga was west to east, to Moscow, in that direction.

You didn't need even tickets. They let in. And the most were with army trains and a few carriages they had for us. And we lived not far from the railroad station. So we took the sister and her two children and her husband, and we put on the train to go to the shtetl because our shtetl was on the east.

So here's what happened. And this I found out after the war. Instead the train should stop near our shtetl-- our shtetl was about eight miles from the train anyhow-- and let off passengers, they went right on to east, took them to Russia. And I didn't know it until the end of the war.

When the Germans came in, I used to hear how they, in Riga, they didn't kill the Jews. They killed the ones, but en masse. But in the little towns, they gave weapons to the peasants and to all the Christians and said go and kill the Jews. And they were buried or burned in the synagogue. In my shtetl, they were all put together in those synagogues and put on fire. And one group with a rabbi from, they made it out to the woods.

So that [INAUDIBLE] we again, a mistake we made. We put my sister and her family in the mouth of the lion. And after, as time passed by, I thought maybe that was the best. They didn't have to suffer because we'll all go under. And I was with the idea that they are not alive anymore.

Now we'll go back what happened. When the Russians came in, right away the Jews and the Jews, they are-- every day, over the radio and in the paper used to be laws, decrees that the Jews, for example, the first was that every Jew has to wear a yellow Star of David. Some didn't have the yellow cloth. And the next day, they said that in a certain address you'll get the yellow cloth. Everybody's allowed to go there.

Oh, yeah, for the first day, no Jews are allowed on the street, for the first couple days. Then no Jew is allowed to walk on the sidewalk. All the Jews has to turn in their radios and cameras and their gold and silver, wedding rings and everything. So radios and cameras, they brought out the-- jewelry, some gave a little and hit a lot, or they had good friends with the Greek Christians. They asked them to hide or something. But you had to go on-- no radios.

And every decree was like that. If you don't follow, you'll be shot on the spot. Anybody who is found with a radio will be shot, and always shot, shot. So then how about the stores? Jews can't go and stores and buy except for 7:00 till 8:00, in one hour. And it was very, very frightening and very dangerous because it wasn't only talk. There were a lot of people who were shot, a lot.

Then a lot of people were taken out from the homes at night and arrested, and you didn't know what happened to them. Then after that, they said that every male Jew from 16 and up has to register for work in the prefecture, the police station. And everybody had to go. Whoever we'll find in the house, that they will be shot.

And then I'll mention, I too, I went to register and they took me to hard work and such. And human behavior and this, I thought it is--

What did you do, Irving?

What kind of work? One time, for example, they put us in in a big Russian warehouse that had, the oats and fodder for animals. You had to load it, and load it on inside-- no water and this. And you inhaled all the dust for a day. And it was bad. And you couldn't ask them for a little water, nothing. Word. Then we had to fill sacks and put it on the trucks.

And another the day I was-- and that was the worst-- I was taken to work near a railroad, where they had a depot and a lot of the railroad ties impregnated with chemicals. It was already windy and cold. And we had carried it for half a mile too. And, you know, the long ties, they are good lumber, squares. They were heavy too. And one-- one hour or two is one thing. But you have to work 10 hours.

And I remember, I told you already. When the chemicals and the splinters fell in in your eyes, and you were sore, you know, your shoulder, and the next day-- and no food. At the end of the day, they gave us half a loaf of bread to take home. And come tomorrow again.

And some got beaten up. And you know, when a German, when he hits you, he hit to injure you. And I thought there is no use. And I wanted to commit suicide, I'll tell you. I mentioned it to you. I don't want it to be that way.

Well, if you die, who knows which way is harder to die. And maybe there is a chance. Let's make it. Maybe it'll improve. Maybe, you know, always to get the benefit of doubt. And I did not go to work. And here's what happened.

When the alarms were, and I had to go to a shelter-- our building, where I lived, didn't have a shelter. So I had to go to a next building. And in each shelter, there were organized already by the Russians before the Germans came in. They had a older man who organized. And that was pretty good organized. They had even beds and mattresses for women or children. And the adults were standing or sitting down. There were no benches. But it was all from [INAUDIBLE].

So there was a man, and he lived next door to where I lived. But before I saw him, but I never made contact with him. And so he was very friendly to me.

What was his name?

Sirius, Janis Sirius. A Christian, a goy. And so somehow, I used to come in. In fact, I was, I think, the only Jew. And I was standing in a corner, and the goyim used to talk [INAUDIBLE] and laughing. And they had one more than I was, and I knew what is going to go on. And I don't know if they know it, that I'm Jewish or not. But anyhow, we got a little bit acquainted during the few evenings when there was the alarms.

And-- and when I didn't go to work, I start getting afraid. Oh, yeah, and they start giving out signs, walking signs, that if you worked, belonged to somebody, you can go on the street. And if they catch you you show you are working, all of us there. They can beat you up or catch you, anybody. So I started to work. So I thought, I'll go too, and I'll register myself for work again.

So while going, I see next door to my building, some Jewish girls go in. And one kept-- I know one. I went to high school together. So I asked her, what are you doing here? She said, oh, we are working here. She said the man brings us even food from a restaurant. That was an huge. So I thought, that would be a good job for me. It's next door, you know, because the walking was a danger, walking on the street.

And I didn't know what had been, so I go in. And they said, yeah, there's the man. You can talk. I go in, and I saw that man, you know, who was the guard, the Ordungs holder, who kept order. And he is their boss. He hired them.

So I go in, and I tell him, can he use-- yeah, I can use you. So he goes with me to the police station and said-- he leads me. And they were giving me a sign, and he keep me. Now, who was that man?

Next to our building in town was-- it was called a school museum. And what is a school museum. In America you don't have it. For example, in America, it's public school or high school. If they have an aquarium, they can have a fish aquarium or have a reptile. Or there is zoo not far away. You take your kids there. We didn't have it.

So this, he had a whole floor of--