

Fira Oussatinski

Russian Vets

Fira Oussatinski 1

Duration 1:57

- 00 00 My name is Fira Gerinzeit-Oussantinski. I was born in shtetl Zguritsa, Soroki District, Moldavia. At that time the territory was called Bessarabia. It was governed by Romania until 1940. 00 30
- 00 30 And then the Soviets overtook the power. We became the Republic Moldavia. Over that period of time I completed grade 5 at a Romanian school. As for my family and our living circumstances, my father was the only working person in the family. 00 58
- 00 58 He managed to make ends meet. My mother stayed at home, she was a homemaker. She had enough work to do at home. She had 7 kids. Only 4 daughters survived. 01 13
- 01 13 I was the baby of the family. In our family we used to read aloud books, discuss books, the politics, including international situation, all the kids participating in those activities. 01 32
- 01 32 As the baby of the family I was also involved in the readings and discussions aimed at developing conversation and communication skills. My parents were ardent theatre lovers. 01 48
- 01 48 They used to help and stand up for culture and education. 01 57

End of file

Fira Oussatinski 2

Duration 4:55

- 00 00 By the time the war broke out we were 7. My granny had come to visit us. The war broke out on June 22. Approximately by the beginning of July we remained without any authorities. 00 27
- 00 27 Let's be honest. Nobody touched us during that period of time. As soon as July 7th the Romanians and Germans invaded our shtetl. We didn't know but the surrounding shtetls were full of farmers ready to start pogroms. 00 52
- 00 52 As soon as the Germans and Romanians entered our area the pogroms broke out. As a child, my every minute was a tragedy. At first we stood near our house 01 09
- 01 09 All of a sudden it became dark. There wasn't sunlight any more: the feathers were let out of pillows and dust from under the farmers' carts wheels rushing to do their robbing – hid the sun. 01 25
- 01 25 At that time a vehicle came rushing from around the corner...sorry, it was a cart, with a wife, a husband and their son sitting on it. The man knew my

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Dad, he jumped down, took a big stone and threw it at my Dad. Luckily he missed, but he broke the window. 01 53

01 53 I might have forgotten... but suddenly I saw him grabbing a knife and running in our direction to kill my Dad! True, his wife and son caught him, took him onto the cart and went rushing away. 02 11

02 11 After that my Dad said "We are facing a deadly danger. Let's go hide in our kitchen. Let them do whatever they want to". It started around noon... We were sitting in the kitchen – my uncle, Dad's brother with his two sons and wife...02 40

02 40 The farmers entered our house taking all they wanted, starting with furniture sets and ending with food – all they wanted. We were dead silent hoping they'd better take everything and let us live. 03 03

03 03 And it lasted all day long – the long July day till the evening. In the evening the pogrom subsided and we remembered that we hadn't eaten and drunken water all day long. 03 22

03 22 My mother was about to give something to eat to our granny and us. At that moment an acquaintance of us, a Jew named Chaim got inside our house through the window. 03 34

03 34 He came from the downtown, praying "Please hide me, soldiers are running after me, they want to kill me!" That was a major commotion. We learnt from him that over that short period of time more than 200 people had been murdered in our shtetl. 03 59

03 59 It's hard to say the exact number of people murdered. (What was the name of your shtetl? Repeats) Our shtetl was called Zguritsa... Zguritsa. 04 14

04 14 The most dreadful fact was this. If a shooting squad had shot at us we'd understand that it was done by the new authorities. Unfortunately, most of murders were committed by people armed with axes, knives, sticks etc. 04 36

04 36 Those murderers were farmers who killed those who stood in their way not letting them to do their looting and robbing. There had been few men in the shtetl as it was. After that only old people, children and women remained. All of the younger men were murdered. 04 55

End of file

Fira Oussatinski 3
Duration 7:16

00 00 After that everyone decided we had to hide somehow because our lives were in danger. We went down to our court yard and heard someone speaking Yiddish in the neighbouring house. 00 22

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- 00 22 And so we got over the fence in the night to be together with other Jews. We were 40 or more there. We spent the night there. Early in the morning... early in the morning soldiers and farmers arrived. 00 52
- 00 52 I can't say for everyone, but in the room we stayed... one woman entered and started talking to my sister. She said "I like your dress. Take it off!" My sister had to take the dress off and give it to her. 01 09
- 01 09 And on and on "I like this... I like that... take it off!" All our men were left with their underwear on, all our women were left without their dresses and footwear – goes without saying... 01 22
- 01 22 That was an appalling humiliation! Soon, in the afternoon, soldiers came running in. All of us were fluent in Romanian. They started turning us out of the house and to the river to kill us by shooting. 01 46
- 01 46 They didn't hide from us their intention to turn us out and to the river in order to kill us. My mother was holding my hand. She kept saying to my sisters "Stand by me. (crying) We'll die together!" 02 06
- 02 06 My father stayed to help my granny. They hit him on the head with such a force he could hardly walk to catch up with us. We were taken to the river. You realize when you are pushed to walk to your death you can't take anything with you. 02 31
- 02 31 An hour passed...There were machine guns set up on the hill. An hour passed and we were not shot. Another hour passed... approximately...armed soldiers went away. 02 50
- 02 50 We remained standing in a broiling sun. We had neither water nor food. There was no shelter either. There was a river nearby, but it was used to wash horses. 03 05
- 03 05 We were hungry but most of all we were terribly thirsty. There were drops of water in the holes made by horseshoes. We lied on our stomachs and drank that water. 03 24
- 03 24 Same night we managed... not we... my father and sister were allowed to get up and take our granny to the river. She had remained alone there. 03 42
- 03 42 Once our granny was with us the shtetl was put on fire. The shtetl's name was Zguritsa, it was situated not far from a district centre called Soroki, which was bigger than ours, and also a Jewish town. 04 02
- 04 02 The shtetl was on fire: all night long it was like a daylight. In the morning... during that panic, when we were pushed to the river to be shot, children lost their parents and parents lost their children! 04 21
- 04 21 Wives didn't know where their husbands were and husbands didn't know where their wives were! Among us... I might have forgotten, but it was such a tragic incident... 04 34

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- 04 34 He lived on the hill near the river, not far from our house. He was among us but his wife was not there. He asked permission to go uphill and check if she was wounded lying in their house. 04 54
- 04 54 We saw him going uphill... oh God... and suddenly we heard a harrowing scream. And right away a German on a motorcycle shot him. As we learnt later, he went uphill and saw that his wife had been murdered and left lying on the house threshold. 05 20
- 05 20 And he gave the scream. Unfortunately a German happened to be there. And also unfortunately he didn't kill him, he just wounded him. We were downhill, while he was uphill under the broiling sun. 05 40
- 05 40 He didn't ask for help. He knew there wasn't anybody who could help him. All he did was just groaning. And all of us... we were sitting where we were, absolutely helpless... 05 55
- 05 55 And it lasted until the evening came. In the evening, when he was taken downhill... I saw it with my own eyes... (crying) worms and ants were eating him alive. 06 13
- 06 13 Of course at night he died of infection. That was the first time in my life I saw a human being shot at. 06 26
- 06 26 The next day... July 10th as far as I remember... they announced that we were going to leave. Where? What for? How? No answer. We were turned to walk along Moldavia's roads... with no food, not enough drinking water! 07 02
- 07 02 All the old and sick people were killed by shooting that same day... including my granny. 07 16
- End of file
- Fira Oussatinski 5
Duration 10:09
- 00 00 They made us walk and walk... we didn't know where and why; and again, no food and hardly any water. Our only luck was this: in Moldavia there were fruit trees growing on both sides along all roads. 00 22
- 00 22 That was our only salvation. The road was covered with dead bodies, especially those of old people. I saw it myself: 4 people walking with excrements and urine running down their legs...00 46
- 00 46 They were afraid to stop walking... (crying)... Ok. They fell down and remained lying on the ground. They weren't killed, they were left to be eaten alive by animals, worms, birds you name it. 01 11
- 01 11 Along the road to Unghenni...Unghenni was a town near Yassy on Moldavia's side. To what despair mothers were driven! They were leaving their children on the roadsides! 01 36

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- 01 36 One day I saw a child. I stopped to look for his mother. She was nowhere to be seen. I wanted to take him from the ground into my arms. But my father... he always protected me...01 54
- 01 54 He came up to me and said "Honey, we don't have the right to take this child with us. I know what you're thinking and what you're feeling. But you realize, we're in need. 02 09
- 02 09 We're in danger. We have no food, not enough drinking water, not mentioning water to wash ourselves. Child's mother left him on the roadside hoping that someone would pick him up and adopt him. 02 31
- 02 31 And that will be the only chance for the child to survive". I was crying in despair, I had such a pity for the kid. But my father took me in his arms and carried me away. 02 44
- 02 44 This was one of the stories...Here's another story. They stopped for the soldiers to have their meals. Nobody cared that we didn't have anything to eat. 02 57
- 02 57 They finished eating and started having fun. Our long-bearded rabbis and our shochets... they started throwing little spirals at their beards... they pulled the spirals out with blood... and I was looking... I don't know why my father didn't take me away from seeing that. 03 25
- 03 25 Or they were having fun beating our men who were rolling on the ground like snakes. They took photos and laughed. At that moment my father grabbed me and carried me away. 03 38
- 03 38 I must say I was guarded against such sights. But it was impossible to guard me all the time. Those were 2 stories that took place over the 3 weeks of our being on the road from Zguritsa to Unghenni. 03 59
- 03 59 Once we reached Unghenni we were told to go back to Soroki. We were happy hoping that would be the end of the tragedy. However we found out that we were forced to walk to Soroki to join 10,000 more Jews and to be put into the first camp - the death camp - near Ublentsy, not far from Soroki. 04 34
- 04 34 All the old people and children from our column had been dead by that time. But in the new column of 10,000 Jews in Soroki, there were old people and children. 04 52
- 04 52 All of them remained in the camp. Nobody was let in or out of the camp. All attempts to get out ended in being immediately shot. We had nothing to eat. We would pick up grass and leaves from trees. 05 19
- 05 19 There was a corn field nearby. We risked our lives stealing the corn. It was unbearable. Life lost its value. We weren't even strong enough to kill ourselves. 05 45

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- 05 45 Humiliation, beatings, walking 2 km to fetch some water, nothing to carry water in... a kettle of water to wash ourselves...it was only natural that we were dirty, eaten alive by lice. 06 11
- 06 11 3 weeks later old people and children were gone again. We were pushed to walk to another camp. We almost died in that camp. Walking along the road saved our lives: we stole potatoes from fields... God forbid stealing anything from houses...06 41
- 06 41 We stole some fruit...We were taken to the camp called Rublentsy. It was a former shtetl... it was called [inaudible], we had been in Rublentsy too. And compared to our previous camp it was unbearable. 07 04
- 07 04 It was a real hell on the Earth! We were surrounded by barbed wire conducting electrical current, Romanian soldiers stood by on the sides protecting us... against what and who? 07 27
- 07 27 How did we survive? There wasn't even grass or trees there. At that time we didn't know that the entire population of that Jewish shtetl had been executed – 7,000 people. 07 47
- 07 47 We didn't know about that at the time. There weren't even mice there. Neither dogs nor cats – nothing! Nothing! How did we survive?! We survived...They often used to put men to work. What kind of work? 08 17
- 08 17 They took Jewish houses down to pieces for building materials to send out and get big money. We... I don't mean myself, I mean the men... weren't paid anything at all. 08 33
- 08 33 However... take my father... I can't tell you about other men because I am not aware...one day my father found a little flour in the attic of a house. The flour was bitter. It was our salvation. 08 53
- 08 53 A glass of flour and a whole kettle of water – and we had something to stay the pangs of hunger. Living there was impossible. Another day he found some cattle cake. 09 11
- 09 11 Even rats didn't eat it. We ate it, a small piece each morning and evening – just to save ourselves from starvation. That's how we lived 3 more weeks in that camp. 09 28
- 09 28 When we were leaving the camp there was a table with 2 Romanian soldiers standing by. They were giving directions: "You go to the right and you go to the left". No one among us knew... I think even the soldiers didn't know... 09 45
- 09 45 ... where they were sending us. We went to the right. All those who went to the left, among them my father's brother with family, my father's 2 cousins with families, many people, all of them were executed 2 days later. 10 06
- 10 06 (One second) 10 09

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End of file
Fira Oussatinski 6
Duration 7:35

- 00 00 Those who went to the right, were taken to Vrublensky woods. As I have mentioned, 7,000 people had been executed in Vrublensky woods before we got there. 00 17
- 00 17 And 6,000 more were shot later. Apparently we were the next to be executed. However God spared us their lot. We were a few left alive. 200 or more people were taken... the remaining men who were not young...00 42
- 00 42 ... but what hurt me most of all, there were boys among them: 13, 14, 15 year old boys. They were taken to work in Soroki and 2 months later they were driven back to the same place and executed. 01 03
- 01 03 There is still a monument there called "Monument to the victims of fascism". It was erected in the woods where 200 or more people had been executed. 01 17
- 01 17 As for us, we got to Ukraine. The famine in Ukraine had subsided a little. Ukrainian women would give us a little food and a little clothing. To make the story short, in Ukraine we reached a farm, it was a pig farm. 01 43
- 01 43 There weren't pigs there already. There were 15 sheds there with pig cages. Each cage became a home for us. Our family of 6 occupied such a cage. 02 10
- 02 10 I'll try and make my story short. At first we were taken to work on the farm and thanks to that we had a little food. Oh, no, not all of us, just those who were capable of working. 02 26
- 02 26 After the Romanian soldiers left, local polizei took their place, and our lives became absolutely unbearable. 02 44
- 02 44 They would lock the shed gate from 5pm to 10 am. But aren't we human?! We needed to go to toilet. And water was on the outside too. And there were people dying of typhoid in every cage! 03 15
- 03 15 As a result of the lack of sanitary... people hadn't washed for 4 months...of course a typhoid epidemic broke out. And those screams every night "Water... give me some water!" 03 36
- 03 36 We risked our lives leaving the cages through windows to bring some water. As a result, my mother announced "Better be shot and killed than live here to die a horrible death we've been observing. We are going to run away". 04 07
- 04 07 Where were we to run? 15 km away, not far from us, there was a ghetto, the Bershad ghetto. And so we decided that same night...my Dad and my older sister knew from the farmers the approximate direction where to go. 04 29

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- 04 29 They went to the ghetto to find out about the possibilities for our family to be there. They were received very well. They returned the next night. The next night, all of us left through the window. 04 50
- 04 50 My father was the first to leave. He looked around to see if there were no guards around. Then he helped us through the window. He stopped us when we reached the nearest forest, saying "Be absolutely quiet. You realize, if found out all of us will be executed... 05 12
- 05 12 I decided, I would lead our group, followed by Mother, 3 sisters, with the oldest sister rearing the group, she knows the way. If someone is killed... keep a 15 m distance. If someone is killed lie down and wait... 05 38
- 05 38 ... and the sister will lead you out. At least someone will survive". The road was horrible, believe me! But by God's mercy we reached the ghetto. When we passed through the gate we went down on our knees to kiss the ground! 06 02
- 06 02 We were happy we reached the ghetto, all of us alive! It was in October. October '41 till March '44 we stayed in that ghetto. The most horrible time was end of '41 and beginning of '42. 06 33
- 06 33 Besides the famine, the typhoid epidemics spread all over the ghetto. Families would perish. Dead bodies were lying around, there weren't anyone to bury them! 06 51
- 06 51 The commandant's office assigned a couple of carts. There wasn't enough time to bury all the dead bodies. Mountains of dead human bodies piled up near the cemetery. 07 07
- 07 07 How did we manage to survive? All of us except our mother were sick with typhoid. My mother was a hero! She did everything in her power to save our lives! 07 23
- 07 23 In particular, what was there in our power? 7 35

End of file

Fira Oussatinski 7

Duration 10:51

- 00 00 My mother took on herself getting firewood, potato peels thrown out by neighbours – so that we had something to eat. 00 13
- 00 13 Our only medical care – there were neither doctors nor medications – was warm water. That was all we had. 00 25
- 00 25 And God did save us. My father used to say "God saved us so that we would tell people what hell on earth we had gone through. 00 40

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- 00 40 We survived but there was no food. We were lucky. There was a Russian store nearby, outside of the ghetto. We weren't allowed to go out. She needed people to work in the basement sorting out produce 01 06
- 01 06 And our girls, including me on one occasion, and Dad – we worked there, it was our salvation until the spring of '42. 01 18
- 01 18 In the spring of '42 everyone began to worry. The weather being warm, the mountains of dead bodies were there, we were afraid of a new typhoid epidemic. 01 35
- 01 35 Epidemics don't care about boundaries and fences. Not only us, but they were also susceptible to illnesses. Therefore the first order was to organize a Jewish team inside the ghetto to send people out to bury those mountains of dead bodies. 02 00
- 02 00 By that time the surviving Romanian Jews started helping us out. They were the first to provide help. They were sending, to their brothers and sisters in Transdnistria, that's what the area was called... they were sending food. 02 31
- 02 31 And we started getting... unbelievable how happy we were!...getting a small piece of bread [shows] every day for everyone. That was our salvation. 02 48
- 02 48 We weren't starving any more. We ate our piece of bread watching that not a single crumb was dropped down. 02 56
- 02 56 The committee was organized to carry out this and other assignments: watching that the ghetto was clean, sending people to work outside of the ghetto and the most horrible to send young people to work in German camps. 03 20
- 03 20 Nobody ever would get back from those German camps. And so in '43... in '43 my sister got on the list to be sent to the death camp. And my parents decided we all were to go...either we all perish or we all survive. 03 51
- 03 51 We were given a little food for the road. 10 or more carts took us to Pechera death camp. 04 08
- 04 08 Approaching the camp... you see we were used to work without rest...just for a small piece of bread... we were figuring on working... But when approaching the camp, we saw, behind the fence, they were not people, they were skeletons working there... 04 33
- 04 33 Unfortunately, one of them, my Dad didn't figure out who he was, recognized my Dad and started yelling "[inaudible] Run away! There will be no life here, you won't get out alive from here!!" 04 49
- 04 49 You can see what our mood was, approaching the camp. There was no way nor chance to run away. They announced that the 'colonel', the boss of the camp, is in the town and we should wait. 05 09

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- 05 09 My Dad approached two skeletons cleaning the square. He approached and asked them... they told him "Your younger kids and you will be killed tomorrow morning. Your elder kids will work until they drop dead or are shot to death". 05 28
- 05 28 That was what the picture was like. My Dad returned to us more dead than alive. We started figuring out what to do. He said... he was the oldest among us...05 42
- 05 42 He said "The only way out is this. The colonel will come back. 5 girls, including my elder daughter, will speak". Her Romanian was perfect and her speech was beautiful. 06 02
- 06 02 To make my story short, the colonel came back; those 5 girls, including my 2 sisters and 3 more girls, all of them speaking Romanian, my elder sister explained to him the situation. 06 19
- 06 19 You are not going to believe! The only question he asked was "How come your Romanian is so good?" She said "We are from Moldavia, and I graduated from a Romanian gymnasium". 06 37
- 06 37 He stopped. A minute that passed was like an eternity to us. He said "I am going to send you back. I don't need you". Such a miracle! 06 55
- 06 55 When we returned... oh and he gave us some food, but that's not important...when we returned our committee leader said "This is the first time I see someone coming back from the dead". Nobody expected us to survive. 07 17
- 07 17 There were many other... Once I went out just to run into two SS soldiers. They didn't kill me, they just beat me up. My sister was sick from frights she had gone through. A German doctor treated her. That was a rarity but a true fact. 07 44
- 07 44 That's how we survived. The first ones to liberate us in March, '44 were the partisans. 3 days later the Soviet Army entered. 08 01
- 08 01 Our lives were saved. A couple of weeks later we came to life a little. We were given food to keep us from fainting. We set off to go home, to our burnt down houses. 08 18
- 08 18 However, it was our salvation. As soon as we got back, the Soviet authorities gave us ration cards. We were hungry but not as starved as we had been in the past. 08 38
- 08 38 To end the story let me say something. All my life I was eager to study. Thanks to my parents and sisters who worked, I was given a chance to study. 08 57
- 08 57 I graduated from high school and was admitted to Chernovtsy University. After graduating from the University I worked as a teacher, all my life. I was a math and physics teacher. 09 10

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- 09 10 I got married and gave birth to 2 daughters. They are here with their families. We are grateful to Canada for having us here. And to end my story, I'd like to address our new generations. 09 32
- 09 32 Addressing our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren and those generations to come, I urge you to be kind and sensitive. Please be vigilant: don't pass by when innocent people are abused. 09 54
- 09 54 Help people. Remember, indifference is equal to treachery. Get together to fight for peace, no matter what ethnicity or religion, all of us are children of our beautiful planet Earth. 10 23
- 10 23 We were not born to destroy, hate or kill. We were born to build, love and be happy. From the bottom of my heart, I wish you all peace, happiness and love! (Thank you) 10 51