We're in Montreal, Canada. It's the 6th of June, 1989. We're at the studio of McGill University. May I ask you to say your name?

My name is Renata Zajdman Skotnicka. I was born in Warsaw in October, 1926. I live presently in Montreal.

I just want to say that during the interview, you don't have to look at the camera. Look at Yehudi or I. It's all set up fine for that, just to feel more comfortable.

I would like to start in the war period, spend a good deal of time on the work period itself, and, if possible, also include something about you're coming to the shores of the New World, in this case, Canada.

Mhm.

And so if we go back in our minds to the 1930s, the periods after Hitler had taken power in Germany in 1933 and you're growing up, what we have is history seen through the eyes of a 11, a 12, a 13-year-old girl basically. How old were you when the war broke out in 1939?

13.

You were 13, right. So I would think that it's very significant to dwell a little bit on these pre-war years and ask you some of the things that you remember, starting with the atmosphere at your parental home, some of the things that concern your immediate siblings, your parents, the profession also of your father, and the kind of family life that you had, a little bit about what was your social background. And maybe that's where we could start. And then after that, talk a little bit about the atmosphere in Poland during that period, as you remember it, especially concentrating on the relationship between Jews and non-Jews also.

And tell us what your parents' names were and your brothers and sisters.

My father's name was Lucian. He was a lawyer. My mother's name was Natalia. I came from a rather privileged background. All the Skotnickas were professionals, which was a rare thing in Poland.

My grandfather was a GP in a small town in Warsaw, Sochaczew. I had two homes. My parents were separated. So I spent my summers with my grandparents in Sochaczew. And school I was in Warsaw or vise versa. There was just-- I would just change homes.

I guess my family considered themselves proud Jews.

The name, you might as well give the name of your mother also and of your siblings while we're at it.

Oh, my mother's name was Natalia Mlynek.

Right.

She came from a rather wealthy background in Warsaw, merchants. All the Skotnickas were professionals. And Mlynek family was a very privileged, rich family in Warsaw. I had a half-brother, Alexander, and a half-sister, Anna.

How were they half-sisters?

My mother was--

--or brothers--

--a widow with two children. And she married my father. And then I was born. So I was actually an only child of my

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father. I--

Their names? Did I hear them right?

Alexander and Anna.

And Anna.

Yeah. Alexander and Anna. I didn't feel anything. I didn't feel the pressure that Hitler was next door.

Before we go into a little bit of--

What it was like--

Background, Jewish, how Jewish, how Polish.

What your home life was like with your parents and your friends. And did you go to a Hebrew school?

No. No, I never spoke--

What kind of Yiddishkeit was there?

Nothing at all. It was very unusual. Nothing at all. Since I was mostly with my father, and my father was very assimilated, I would say. And I was getting conflicting signals because my mother was a traditional Jew. She would respect the Passover and Rosh Hashanah. So when I was with my mother, I knew about Jewish holidays. But when I went to my grandparents' home or to my father's home--

In Sochaczew.

In Sochaczew. There was absolutely different atmosphere, very Polish.

Interesting.

Very Polish. So I really wasn't exposed to Jewish religion at all. I didn't know I was a Jew. All my friends were Polish. We spoke Polish.

My father was very free. He let me play with Polish children. And I would accompany them to church, which eventually saved my life because I knew very well Catholic religion. It was rather a very happy childhood, regardless that my parents were separated. But I did not feel any pressure of any sort.

My grandfather died 1935. And I still remember his funeral procession.

Do you remember what time of year that was?

Passover. It happened exactly on Passover. As I mentioned before, he was a GP. And somebody called him from home. We were having breakfast. He should go and see somebody who was sick. And he went over there knock at the door and collapsed and died right there. So that was a very traumatic experience for everybody, holding it down.

As I mentioned before, my grandpa was a GP. My father was a lawyer. My uncle was a dentist there. And my--

Now this was your grandfather on whose side?

My father's side.

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On your father's side.

The Skotnickis.

So this was in Sochaczew?

In Sochaczew, yeah. And my aunt was a midwife. So they were running the whole town.

Were you in Sochaczew during Passover in 1935?

I was-- during Passover when my grandfather died. I was right there. I saw him a minute before. He just got up from the breakfast table. He called me Miss Muffin. Bye bye, see you later. And that was that.

And when Grandfather died practically whole little town closed the doors, businesses and everybody. And everyone was following in the funeral procession.

Why was he--

He was well known. He was very good. And everybody liked him. He was not a rich man. But he was taking care of Jews and Gentiles.

And he was respected by both?

Very much so. Very much so. He was also a counselor in the city hall. Yeah.

Did he have a Jewish funeral? Or--

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely.

Because you said you didn't know you were really Jewish, so I'm wondering--

Well, I didn't feel anything, any difference between being Jewish and not Jewish. But my grandfather's name was, original name was, Moshe, Morris obviously. But there was never any big thing about it. They didn't hide it. It just-- that was not an issue as far as my grandparents were concerned.

And when grandfather died, he was buried at a Jewish cemetery, outskirts of Sochaczew. And I remember there was a brass band following the coffin with medals, which my grandfather probably had in the first war. I don't know.

With his medals?

Medals, yeah. Medals, with his medals. There was no music. Grandmother said, no music. And everybody respected the funeral procession. And--

Did I hear you say brass?

The brass band.

But the brass band didn't play?

No. No. Grandmother said, no. Just there, just be there.

But they were there with their instruments, but without playing them?

That's right. In their uniforms. I think they were fire department or something, maybe some veterans. I don't recall the

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type of uniform.

And somebody was carrying the medals?

That's right. Right. Now, my grandfather my father died.

That's right, we asked you about-- before you get to that--

Yes.

Can I ask you, around that time, 1935, of course, you were quite young and strapping at that time--

I was nine years old.

Right. But do you remember anything about antisemitism?

No.

Because you move so freely between these two--

Nothing--

--in between these two worlds.

No. No. No. Nothing at all. Absolutely nothing.

Was there a time that changed in those like later '30s?

Slightly. Yeah, it started slowly.

That you were aware of?

That I was aware of it? In school they used to call kids dirty Jew. But I didn't connect this with me.

I mean, that had been the case. That--

Yes, there were calling other kids dirty Jews. But since I didn't know what really a Jew mean. So I thought to me a Jew was somebody who were different way of dressing, going to synagogue every day, you know, what we know as Hasidim. To me that was a Jew.

It wasn't you.

It was not me. So I personally did not feel any difference. And there were some Jewish kids which were probably tormented by Polish kids because their Polish was very poor. They did not speak Polish.

And your Polish was--

They were called there their names--

Well, that's--

--totally fluent--

Was that the only language I knew. Yeah.

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So was there a particular moment that you first came into contact with--

Yes--

--with your Jewish identity?

Yes. Yes, very much so. I suppose my father felt the change in atmosphere. But I was protected. And I just didn't absorb the differences. I heard some discussions at table. But I was preoccupied with myself, with my school, with books, with kids. And I was still quite young.

What kind of a man was your father? What did he do? And what kind of man was he?

Well, my father, I remember, his one-- always used to tell me that he's not running a popularity contest. So he was very free. Whatever he wanted, he said. He did not-- he was not a diplomat at all. No, not at all. And I remember his office was always full of Jews asking for help. And he would write a letter to the authorities and so on.

He was a lawyer, right?

Yes, was a lawyer. My father studied in Switzerland. And in 1937, on a technicality, he lost the right to practice law, which I understood later apparently he didn't pass some exams in Poland. And they threw him out from the bar association.

But he had been practicing until then?

Yes, that's right. He didn't give up. He hired a young fellow from Warsaw, a lawyer, and business as usual.

Open to new laws.

Except that he was going to court under the different name, representing the other fellow. Apparently, the Minister of Justice in '38 closed the list of new lawyers because there were too many Jews which graduated. So they closed the list for seven years. So on a technicality, my father was not a lawyer any longer.

But he had a legal office. There are different petitions and so on. There were always people around there.

And somehow he got in trouble, political trouble, with his former friends, which were in the city. It's hard to go into details. But my father had a heart condition. He was quite a young man, 50 years old. Had angina. And it cost him his life.

Apparently, it was a closed hearing. And he was sentenced to go to a first concentration camp, which was in Poland was called Bereza Kartuska. And the same night, my father died.

Why was he sentenced to go to concentration camp?

He insulted the mayor of the city.

Oh, and that was a very serious offense--

Well, he insulted-- I think they wanted him to force-- they wanted to force him to put some money into the national party or whatever. And my father said, no. And the fellow called him, told him that he's not a good Patriot. And he told him I'm a better Patriot than your SOB mayor. And probably that was an insult of the-- very serious insult. And--

He called him an ass basically. He called the mayor an ass.

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Yes. Yes. That's what I said. He was not a diplomat, yeah.

So they sent--

And my-- yeah, it was a closed hearing. I mean I didn't know about those things. Later I found out from bits and pieces. And my father died the same night.

And that's really all you knew at that time that that your father--

I was alone with my father when he died, heart attack.

You were alone with him?

I was alone. As I said, my mother was in Warsaw. I was alone with my father when he died. And I called Warsaw. My mother came, and my brother. And the next day was my father's funeral.

And while we were bringing my father to the cemetery, young hoodlums were throwing stones at the coffin, at the funeral procession. So that was my introduction to antisemitism.

Was it clear that they were throwing those--

Oh, yes, of course--

--stones because this was a Jewish--

Yes, of course. Of course. Calling us dirty names and throwing stones. I recognized some of my friends, neighbors, and so on, like through a fog. I was only 13. But that will stay with me for the rest of my life.

This was what? 1937?

No, 1939, April 27. My father died April 27, 1939. I was very stubborn I refused to go back to Warsaw. I decided to finish my school there, stayed alone. But, of course, I just became complete hermit. I didn't want to have anything to do with my friends.

Didn't you have family other than--

My mother-- my father's sister was living next door. And I rejected her too. I was just too traumatized to be with anyone.

So you were living by yourself in your father's house?

In our home, yeah, that's right. And every day I would go-- the high school I went to was next to the Jewish cemetery. And straight from school I would just go to the cemetery and stay there and do my homework.

Right next to your father's gravestone?

Right. That's right. And I just didn't want to know anybody. Finally, when the vacation time came, my brother came. He said, it's about time you're coming home to us--

To Warsaw?

Together. And--

This is your brother, Alexander.

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My brother, Alexander. He locked the apartment. And he said, that's enough, you know, and you're coming. And I went to Warsaw. My mother was living there with her daughter and her son, my family.

The atmosphere in my mother's home was very bad. My mother was crying all the time. When I felt--

Why was she crying?

Well, I felt that she missed my father. But basically, what I understood later that my mother realized that what's going on next door in Germany. And she felt we are next. That war is coming, and there's nothing we can do about it. We are trapped.

I remember there were German refugees coming for dinner quite often. My mother spoke German pretty well.

That's right. After 1938, there was a flow of German refugees--

Yes, it was--

Who were sort of kicked out of Germany and had to repatriate themselves.

That's right.

Even though--

Those which did not have German citizenship.

Even though they had been in Germany for a whole generation.

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, but they were returned to the border. And--

And so refugees would come to your house and tell stories.

Tell stories, that's right. So it was a very gloomy atmosphere.

Though you did not associate that atmosphere especially with--

Oh, yes I did already.

--the war?

Oh, yes, I did. I mean, it was-- of course, being a child, I was still hoping that, well, maybe my mother is just worried. Maybe she worries for nothing. It just won't happen. And my brother was mobilized in middle of August '39.

So he was old enough to go into the army?

Oh, that was a reserve. My brother was 13 years older than me. He was 26. So that was after his army service that was. He was already in the reserves.

There were very few Jews which were in Polish air force. My brother was one of them. He was a very good looking, handsome man. I guess he was a token Jew because there were very, very few. He was in the Polish balloons, reconnaissance balloons. They really didn't have planes, but--

They had balloons to do--

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Balloons, that's right, yeah. That's right. And he was mobilized in August. So my mother was really--

Upset because of that also.

She was desperate she felt that beginning of the end. I remember her using that expression is the beginning of the end. September the 1st was Friday.

You remember that day?

Yes, it was-- my mother was born on that day. She turned 46. My brother was already in the army and the air force, stationed not too far from Warsaw, outskirts. So we even went there to see him.

Where was he stationed?

Jablonna, Legionowo, it was a small town where they had the-- where they were stationed.

So here we are, 1st of September.

September the 1st was Friday morning. We thought we'd cheer up my mother. And my sister brought some flowers and a little brooch. And we came to her bedroom.

My mother's bed was, luckily, not close to the window. And while we're sitting and talking to Mother and laughing, we heard horrible noise. I didn't know what bombs-- that there was a bomb site. It was just a storm. And all the windows shattered. So the bedroom was covered with glass. But it didn't reach-- I mean, nothing happened to me or my sister or my mother because we were far away from the window. And that was the beginning of the war, September 1.

September the 3rd, on Sunday, I was with my mother and with my sister in front of the British embassy. We were singing Polish National hymn. We're so happy because France and--

England.

England declared war against Germany. So we felt we're saved. There was so much hope in the air. Jews and Poles were brothers all of sudden because I remember that people were singing "Hatikvah" and nobody said anything. It was a real brotherhood-- There was also brotherhood a week before the war because we were-- voluntarily we're all going to dig trenches, anti-graft trenches, around Warsaw and barricades.

To help stop the advance of the German army.

That's right, yes. And there were no incidents of any sort. And then I was trapped in Warsaw for four weeks of the siege. Warsaw was surrounded a week later. We didn't know where my brother was.

My brother was engaged. He was supposed to be married in December the same year. And his fiancee and her family were living in a Jewish district.

What was his fiance's name?

Maricia, Mary. And--

Jewish girl?

Yes, Silberstein. And I don't remember if it was Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah. But it was the last one and the most powerful bombing, bombardment of Warsaw. And it was personally led by Hermann Goering. It was strictly zeroed on the Jewish district.

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Mary and her family-- there were 20 people there-- died in the bombardment. So that was the first victim in September. One of my cousins, a few years older than me, knew about it. He came running, and he told me in secret that Mary's dead and I should tell Mother.

I went over there. And we took her out. She was already practically decomposed, lying under ruins. And we buried her in the city-- on a square in front of some building so we'd know where she was buried.

But that was a very common thing. People couldn't go to cemeteries burying their dead. They were just--

Because cemeteries were outside and--

Outside--

And the city was surrounded.

That's right. And we were just burying them in courtyards and so on. My mother decided she would not stay home because it was safer with everybody together. So we went to my grandmother's house, my aunt's house. They were living in a very big house. It was like a fortress.

But even there, we were not safe there. So we're running from one place to the other. I remember through that month we were probably escaping five, six different apartments.

And September 28, Warsaw was surrounded. There was no electricity. There was no water. I still remember those-- that horses. It was horrifying. There were dead horses. And people were just lashing at those carcasses with knives trying to get food. There were--

Food was a problem?

--no food for refuges.

The food was a problem already.

Yes, it was a problem. We weren't prepared for the war. My mother had a basement full of food, staples. But since we left the home-- I mean, there was-- became a big problem. And they were just hacking away at those horses and flies. And it was a horrifying thing. There were more to come. But--

So then Warsaw surrendered and you--

Warsaw surrendered.

--saw the first Germans coming in--

Yes.

Probably fairly soon after. Like right away you saw Germans?

Ah, no, it was quiet for a day or two. It was quiet for a day or two. And then they marched in.

Do you remember that?

Oh, yes, I remember that because they said Hitler is coming. I didn't see him. But I saw Germans marching in. We're living in a very fashionable part of Warsaw, called KrÃ³lewska, right downtown.

Is this sort of a Jewish quarter?

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Not at all. No. Close to the-- mixed district, but they were mixed. But it was rather a wealthy part of Warsaw. KrÃ³lewska, I would compare it to Sherbrooke West, something like that. So obviously, we were the first victims to be expelled--

Evicted?

From our-- evicted from our home because the Germans took it for themselves for the ethnic Germans and for themselves, for the officers. So we left within two hours.

And did you still have your house that you had left earlier on?

No.

No.

No, no.

That was gone?

That was gone. Later, I realized we had a housekeeper, little Janka. She was not with us during the siege. But apparently, she was able to get some stuff out, some valuables, which later saved our life because she was supporting--

Because later on--

--us. She was selling--

You could trade the valuables left behind in you earlier house.

That's right. And she put in safekeeping with some friends.

For you?

Yes.

Or--

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. So we were left with nothing already.

So this all happened so fast that you couldn't--

Within four weeks.

Everything changed?

Everything turned.

Like your whole life was--

Oh, yes.

Turned upside Down?

Yes, that's right. And I don't know if you're-- well, I'm sure you know that September the 17th was when the Russians

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made a pact with Germans. That was the Ribbentrop--

Divided--

Molotov Pact. And they divided Poland. And they only went up to River But.

That was the Eastern border of the German occupied--

Yes--

Zone of Poland.

That's right. Now, my mother spoke Russian very well because she was educated in Russian schools and universities. So she decided to work in class too long. We have to get out of here, and we'll go to the Russian zone. We didn't know where my brother was.

Right.

We're waiting for my brother. And about a week after Germans took Warsaw, he sneaked in at night. He found us. We were staying with my aunt. He already knew that Mary was dead.

And he had a very daring escape because he did not report to the Germans. He stole a horse and a peasant's suit and a gun-- and a gun. And he came to Warsaw on a horse.

Not your Jewish stereotype at all.

No, not at all. Not at all. On a horse, looking like a real peasant. So it was probably two sizes small. My brother was very big, about 6' 6", 6' 2".

And I still remember. He had a bottle of water and a loaf of bread because they told him there's no water in Warsaw. So he brought with him. He came. He was a mess because he was riding the whole night without a saddle. So his whole behind was sore.

And then when he found out Mary was dead, he absolutely went crazy. And my mother said, we have to get him out of here. We have to get him to the Russian zone because he'll just want ride no matter what happens.

He was so full of feelings of outrage and protest and everything.

He was not a coward.

No.

He was not a coward. And my mother got in touch with some smugglers. I mean they were not professional smugglers. It happened that people, peasants, which used to have their farms and live around where the artificial border was became smugglers because there was money in it.

And your mom was sort of smart enough--

And somehow--

--knowing enough--

There were more people like my mother. A lot of people--

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There was a connection. There was a route to get to.

A route to get to the other side and especially not for us, mostly she meant my brother. She felt that nothing will happen maybe to us. But Alexander has to get out. I mean, we have to get him out.

And she made a deal with one of those fellows, those professional smugglers, which we called them, that she will paid him a certain amount, and if my brother will be safe on the other side, you get the rest. And then we'll go.

Within a few days, we got news that my brother is there in Bialystok--

On the Russian side.

On the Russian side. There were two big cities on the Russian side, Bialystok and Lvov. That my brother crossed the border safely and he's in Bialystok.

And my mother said, now, you are next, you and your sister. I said, what about you? Oh, I still have to liquidate certain things. I'll come later.

And we went the same route.

And succeeded?

Yes. Obviously.

And found your brother?

Yes, we found our brother. My sister was very restless. After a few days, she said, I'm going back to get mom. My brother said, don't do it. I mean, Mother will find her way. No, I'm going back to get Mother.

And she did. And they crossed each other's path. My mother went to Bialystok. My sister went to Warsaw. They never saw each other again.

When she came back to Warsaw, our housekeeper Janka was there. And she said Mother went to Bialystok. Then my sister again went crossing the borders the way some people cross the street. I mean there were barbed wire. But the border was not a sealed as later within a few months.

And my mother could not get through the border, the same route. So she went around. She went to Lvov and took her a while to get to Bialystok. She came sick. And my mother died within three weeks. She had typhus.

There was no medication. She died in a Russian hospital, no treatment, nothing, January the 1st, 1940. I was with my brother. And my sister couldn't get through. Apparently, she was arrested by the Russian, thrown back.

She didn't know the route. Your mother had organized it all before.

No, it's just that didn't work that time. I mean there were different sentries. I guess maybe they couldn't bribe them that day. And she was arrested, thrown back into little shack, then went back.

Back to Warsaw.

And she couldn't get through. By the time she wanted to come in January, it was completely sealed. The borders were sealed. There was no more traffic. It was too late. And she was stuck in Warsaw.

My brother decided that we have to go back to Warsaw. We have to be with Anna, with my sister. And I said, no. I was terrified of the Germans. And I said, I'm not going back.

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It was a very tough scene because my brother practically beat me up. And I said, I'm not going. I run away. I was so terrified. I said, I'm not going. Just, I'm not going back. And I ran away.

And I knew some people which were living in Bialystok with the friends of our neighbors and so on. And my brother couldn't do anything about it because he was going back with a group of people. And you couldn't say, well, I'm not coming today, I'll go tomorrow. I mean, that's it. He had to be at a certain place, a certain time. It was fate.

He felt it was his duty to go back--

To be back in Warsaw with our sister. And I was a kid. And I didn't realize that I should have done. And my fear was bigger than my-- than my heart. And I stayed in Bialystok.

And I lost touch with them. There was no communication at all. I didn't know where they were. And they didn't know where I was.

And I was staying with those people. And they had a very bright idea. They decided that the best way for me is to go to school. It was very easy for me to go to Russian school because I spoke Russian before I spoke Polish. My nanny was Russian. And my parents spoke Russian. So I just picked it up.

And I was very big for my age. And I told them I'm 17. And they believed me.

And I went to a boarding school. There were a lot of refugees there. And there was also a lot of peasants, people, which became newly baked communists, you know, opportunities and so on. It was Weiss Russia, Byelorussia. So there were a lot of peasants which were very-- well, they welcomed the Russians.

The key was to be in a boarding school. I should have a place where to be, where to stay.

Get fed.

Get fed, yes. And have a roof over my head and learn--

That's right. And learn at the same time.

And learn at the same time.

And that's what happened?

Yeah. It wasn't too hard, because the level was very-- rather low.

How long did you stay there?

Until the Germans bombed Bialystok.

Came in.

No, I ran away. We had exams. That was June 21 or 22, 1941, Bialystok.

Right.

It was Sunday morning, Saturday to Sunday, where I stayed with a friend of mine. Her name was Irena Podbielska. She's very instrumental into my survival. That's why I mentioned her name. And-- a Polish girl.

I still had some exams. So there were not too many of us in that boarding school. The rest of them went home already.

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Did anybody know you were Jewish?

Of course. There was no problem at that time.

So--

I was actually a fugitive in Bialystok because there was a time that there was a chance for refugees from Warsaw to go back. And I felt very guilty. So I decided to go back and join my family. So I registered to go back.

The first group went back. There was no problem. The second group went to Siberia. There was a choice-- or to go back or to take a passport. And since I was officially 17 years old and already was forced to get a passport.

And to get a passport it was like a second class citizen with a paragraph 11, was a special restriction. That means that you cannot stay in closer than 100 kilometers from the border. And the border was-- Bialystok was not 100 kilometers. It was much less. So I wouldn't be able to stay in Bialystok anyway.

So it was no use for you to get that.

I was trapped. I was trapped. But since I was in that school and I was registered with those people, when they came to get me, I wasn't there. And I just-- had no computers. So they couldn't trace me.

And if they had gotten you, you would have ended up in Siberia?

Siberia, yeah. I would, in Siberia, yes.

That whole group went there?

Yeah. I would be in Siberia. And I just stayed in that school and hoped for the best that they won't find me. There were some occasional roundups.

By the Russians?

By the Russians. Yes.

Of people who shouldn't be--

Right, they should not be-- they felt a threat to their security. I mean what kind of a threat was I? But still--

Nobody turned you in though?

Oh, no, nobody knew about it except Irena. There was no problem.

And Irena was your close friend?

Oh, she was my best friend I ever had. Yes.

In school? You were schoolmates? Same class?

Yes.

Did you sit next to each other?

Next to each other. We slept next to each other. And she was getting parcels from her grandmother from the farm. And

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she would share everything what she had with me. Otherwise, I would probably starve to death.

That's right, because--

We're getting 60 rubles--

--you didn't have an income.

We were getting 60 rubles. I mean I escaped in one pair of underwear. I would wash it at night and put them on the next morning, was still wet.

You had 60 rubles a month to look after everything?

Not enough to live, not enough to die. But that's what we're getting.

From the government.

From the government. Yeah, but other people are getting supplements.

So--

That's all I had. So I had to find a way of supplement my income. So I was selling blood. I would go to Russian hospital. And they paid me 5 rubles. And they would feed me.

I did it too often. I was doing it every few weeks. So finally, somebody, a nurse recognized me, threw me out. So that was finished. She probably saved my life.

[LAUGHTER]

And Irena was helping. We were together. The worst time was I was in real danger when the school was closed, 1940, vacations, and everybody went home.

Summer vacation, right?

Yeah, I could not-- I did not go with Irena to her farm because she was also in danger. Her stepmother, her family, they were rich landowners. So they were also deported later. Only her grandmother stayed on the farm.

Under the Russians.

And her father was an officer with a Polish border patrol.

So now we're close to the summer vacation of 1941, really, in our story?

Well, in 1940, I decided to get out of Bialystok because I couldn't stay in the boarding school. Those people, which I was with before, were deported to Siberia. So actually, I didn't know anybody.

So I found out that there is summer camp for Russian kids 10 kilometers from the border, which was even bigger crime because instead of going away, I went even closer. And I worked there as a cleaning lady. I had a quota. I had to wash floors and toilets, outdoor toilets. I had a quota of, I think, 18 floors, 2 verandas, and 2 toilets, which I made. I did it.

And when the camp closed, I went back to Bialystok. I got a lift from a Russian soldier. He was slightly drunk. And he-- on a motorcycle-- fell into a ditch. I did too. And I hurt my knee, had water in my knee, which saved me again because I went to the hospital. And my cousin's friend was a nurse there, and she took me upstairs. I stayed with her.

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At the same time they were rounding up again people, taking them to Siberia. So again, I was in--

Close scare.

Yeah. And then when the school started, I went back to school. And I felt Irena was coaching me, be a nice little communist. So keep a low profile. Be popular. So you have good reputation and so on. And if something happened, maybe--

So when did you--

--be lenient with you.

So when did you get out finally?

19-- when the Germans-- that's the Operation Barbarossa, right?

June, right?

June 22, I think it was June 22.

'41.

'41.

Right.

It was Sunday. I was asleep. And I heard again same noise. And I knew it from September '39. And I started to yell. I said, Irka, get up. They're bombing. She said, oh, come on.

She was very stoic, very quiet. And I said, they're bombs. They're bombs. And I jumped under her blanket. And she said, well, stop it. That's silly.

I said, they're bombing. I got hysterical, absolutely hysterical. And I grabbed a bundle, just threw a pillow case. And I said, if you're not going, I'm going. And I ran out. And I never saw her since.

We were a few-- a few kids there in that school. Maybe a group of 20 would say there. It was a big school. But since everybody already went home.

And the German Messerschmitt were diving and strafing us. So within half an hour, there were only three of us left.

Died?

Yeah. The rest wounded and dead around there. And when I climbed out of that ditch, I turned back and the school was on fire. So I felt Irena was dead. So there was a lot of guilt I had to carry for 35 years until I found it, 1974.

In 1974, you found--

I found--

--Irena.

In Warsaw. It was a miracle I did find her. Yeah.

She had survived somehow.

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Yeah.

And you were not--

Well, apparently, what she told me, the school wasn't on fire. It was just my imagination, my fear. Next door, the building was on fire next door. And she just got up and went to the farm. And--

Went back to--

That's it. She wasn't in such danger. She was not Jewish.

And you ran east-- westward now?

I don't know. I just ran where everybody else did-- away from the Germans. Obviously, it had to be toward the Russian border.

Eastwards.

Northeast or just east. And those two people from my school, they were a boy and a girl. The girl said she is from a small town called Bielsk Podlaski. Come with us. My parents are there.

So we're running together. I don't know how long, a few days. And then I lost them. So I was on my own.

And then I was caught close to Russian border, to the real Russian border, the pre-war border. By that time, I knew that I have to pass. I'm not Jewish anymore if I want to survive. I had no documents anyway. And my mannerism, my behavior was rather Polish since I grew up with Poles. So I felt since nobody knows me, nobody can betray me. I just really--

You're going to be a non-Jew from that moment onwards.

Oh, absolutely, yeah.

Because you knew the Germans were catching up with you. You could not make it to the border at that point.

Oh, yes, sure. And since nobody knew me, nobody could betray me. I mean they just didn't know who I was.

Right.

I--

Did you look--

Well, I wasn't what you call a very Polish beauty. I wasn't blonde. But--

You could pass.

I could pass. Later I couldn't because I had that despair and fear in my eyes. So that would betray, that would betray me later. But at that point by that point, no, I still could manage.

And there was a German field lazarette, field kitchen. So I went over there. I'm just a peasant. And I want some bread. So they said, well, why don't you peel some potatoes. I said, fine. So I worked there for a few days. I was pealing potatoes.

For the Germans?

Yes. And then I realized I better go home to Warsaw. So I mean, there are Germans here and Germans there. That's it. Now, I have to make my way back home. So I knew what direction I have to go. I have to go back west.

And I remember that my friend was from Bielsk Podlaski. So I asked, where is Bielsk? And they told me direction. I walked a few days.

By yourself?

It was summer-- yes. There are a lot of people on the road, the refugees going back and forth. People were running and going back. It was a lot of traffic. And--

By foot, everybody by foot?

Food? Well, food you steal.

No, by foot, how are you--

By foot obviously. Yeah, yeah. And it was summer. So you slept in a barn or in the field, just was not a problem. And--

You weren't afraid? You were alone. You weren't afraid? That's what I wanted to ask you. All along I'm listening to you tell the story, and I'm trying to imagine what is going on inside you in your mind? And what are you what are the thoughts that you're having while you're running and--

I guess I had a one track mind. I want to go home to be with my brother and my sister. And I did not see the atrocities yet. That's it. It's war, and I'll make it. I wasn't that petrified little child I became later, completely helpless and desperate.

You're 14 and 1/2 now, am I right?

Yeah.

That's so young to be doing that and not be afraid to just--

Well, you don't know if you have inner strength until you're faced with the situation. I was thrown into a situation. I just had to do it.

So you didn't think. You weren't thinking--

No.

--I'm afraid. I hope nothing happens to me.

Oh, no.

I want to get home.

Oh, no. I'm getting home. That's all.

Did you have a good pair of shoes?

No shoes.

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No shoes.

No shoes. No, no, no. I had no shoes.

Barefoot?

Barefoot. That's fine. All the other peasants were barefoot. No problem.

[LAUGHTER]

So you made it to Bialystok?

No, I made to Bielsk. Because you didn't see Jews on the road, so I didn't see atrocities. I saw only peasants.

Nobody bothered you or tried to-- you were a kid then. Nobody tried to--

No, no, no, no, I was just a peasant. Whenever I saw another peasant, I would greet--

What would you say?

Greet the same way, you know.

What would you say?

[POLISH]. It means praise be Lord. And I would cross myself and that was it.

What did you say? Say that again.

In Polish?

Yeah, Polish.

[POLISH]. praise the Lord. And that was it--

Cross yourself?

Of course.

And move on?

And move on, yeah. And then I got to Bielsk. That's when I saw the atrocities. There was a small shtetl, a small town. And I knew my friend's name. Her name was Chaya Kessler. I went to her home. And her brothers were already shot by the Germans. She already told me what happened there, that there took young people and they killed them.

That was the first time you really--

Yes. And there was no bread there. I said nobody knows me. She told me that they were throwing out Jews from the bread lines. I said nobody knows me. And I'll go. And I did get some bread. They didn't know who I was. And I brought them bread.

And then I said, well, I'll say goodbye to you. And I'll go to Bialystok. From Bialystok, I'll make my way to Warsaw. My target was get to Warsaw to my family.

[FRENCH] as they say in French. No matter what.

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No matter what.

So that's the driving force is what I'm hearing is to get to your family.

Yeah. And so I left Bielsk. And I made my way to Bialystok. It took me two days probably. It was about 50 kilometers or so.

When I came to Bialystok, my cousins were there. I knew that I had some cousins. My father's Cousins were there. Also refugees, but they were there. I hope they were still there.

When I came I already saw barbed wire. There were few streets in the slums of Bialystok, which became a ghetto. I went there close to the barbed wire. And I asked a sentry if I can go in. And he said, get lost, because I didn't look Jewish. I looked like a peasant. And it's just for the Jews.

And then I saw them wearing yellow patches, Jude.

Through the barbed wire?

Oh, yes, I mean I saw them around the wire. Jews were wearing yellow patches there because Bialystok became part of the German Reich.

Was this all shocking for you to see the first time? What was your response when you saw that? How did--

What can I say? I still was hoping that I'll make it. I still was hoping that I'll make it.

And at this point, you're trying to get into the ghetto?

Yes.

Which is usually the opposite way from--

[LAUGHTER]

Well, you try to be with people you know regardless where they are, regardless where they are. You just want to be with your close ones. That's all. You feel that if you're together, if not alone, things will get better because you're not alone.

So I walked around. And I found-- that was before the curfew and I got in, I went into Bialystok to ghetto. And I found my cousin and his wife. By the time I looked at mess. And when I came there, my cousin would not let me into the house because she was afraid I was full of lice and--

You're probably were--

I was. I really--

--full of insects.

Yes, that's right, I mean. And she was afraid.

Where'd you go?

Well, her husband was a very relaxed man. And he said, no, just we'll do something about it. And there was like a little doorway outside the apartment. So he gave me a blanket. He said, you can sleep there and be with us.

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So I was able to be with them. And of course, she never let me into the house. He gave me--

So you couldn't stay there?

No, no, but I mean I became part of their household.

But you were like--

It's like real rejection after finally getting there and--

I understood. I forgave her later because she was so traumatized when I found out what happened while I was away. The war started on Sunday. On Wednesday already, the Germans were there. Friday night they took in 1,000 people into the synagogue, and they burned them alive.

And a day later, they went from door to door. And they pulled out other young people, men. And they just shot them. So I understood that she was terrified of everything, disease. And she just probably wasn't there. And they were hungry. And she felt how can she share with me?

Her husband gave me his shoes. He threw away whatever rags I wore. He gave me her nightgown and a rope, put it around my waist, like a dress. And he said, there was already a Judenrat, the Jewish Council, where people lined up every day. And if you're sturdy, if you're strong, if you're a woman, you might have a chance to go to work. And then you get some food, if you're lucky.

So I went there. And he knew somebody who was in charge of putting people into those groups--

Groups that went to work outside--

To work outside the ghetto, yeah.

Right.

And--

So that's what you did?

I did. I found a job.

But that was not your immediate purpose. Your purpose was to get back to Warsaw.

I know. But they said don't go anywhere because there is a steel border and you won't make it. You're safer here. Just stay here with us for a while.

Because there was a real border there, like they were like part of the RAF, and the other part--

Except that the Germans were on both sides. And the border was near Malkinia. And Malkinia later, which I realized, was very close to Treblinka. That was around the same part of Poland.

So I went to work. And they took me to work to repair potholes, roads. But we were getting some food every day. We were getting a jar of buckwheat or some barley. So I became a sole supporter of my cousins, of my family--

Because there was a lot of hunger already--

Oh, yes.

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--in the ghetto.

There was no way to get food there, yeah.

So you became--

So I started to support them. And I was with them. It last a few weeks. And while I was coming-- I was wearing that yellow patch just like everybody else. Very proud that I can help them.

And then one night when we were coming back in groups to-- I heard screaming outside. And there were always a lot of Poles and peasants jeering at us or asking, why don't you give up some gold? And they're trying to get money from us or everything and buy our rags.

Even in you condition--

For food.

--they just thought you still had the money.

Well, of course. Of course. There were always a group of Poles. And--

So somebody started yelling.

Somebody started to yell, Reniusia. That my pet name. And I turned around. That was our housekeeper, Janka.

Who had been looking for you?

Who was commissioned by my brother and sister to go to Bialystok and find me. They didn't know about everything else what happened to me. They decided now we have to bring the child home.

They just assumed that you were in Bialystok. And somehow through a very indirect route you actually were in Bialystok.

So there was no problem to get her into ghetto. You want me to stop?

We need to just change a tape at this point.

Sure.

And then we'll carry on.

Can I take a-- yeah?

Can I have some water?

Yeah.

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